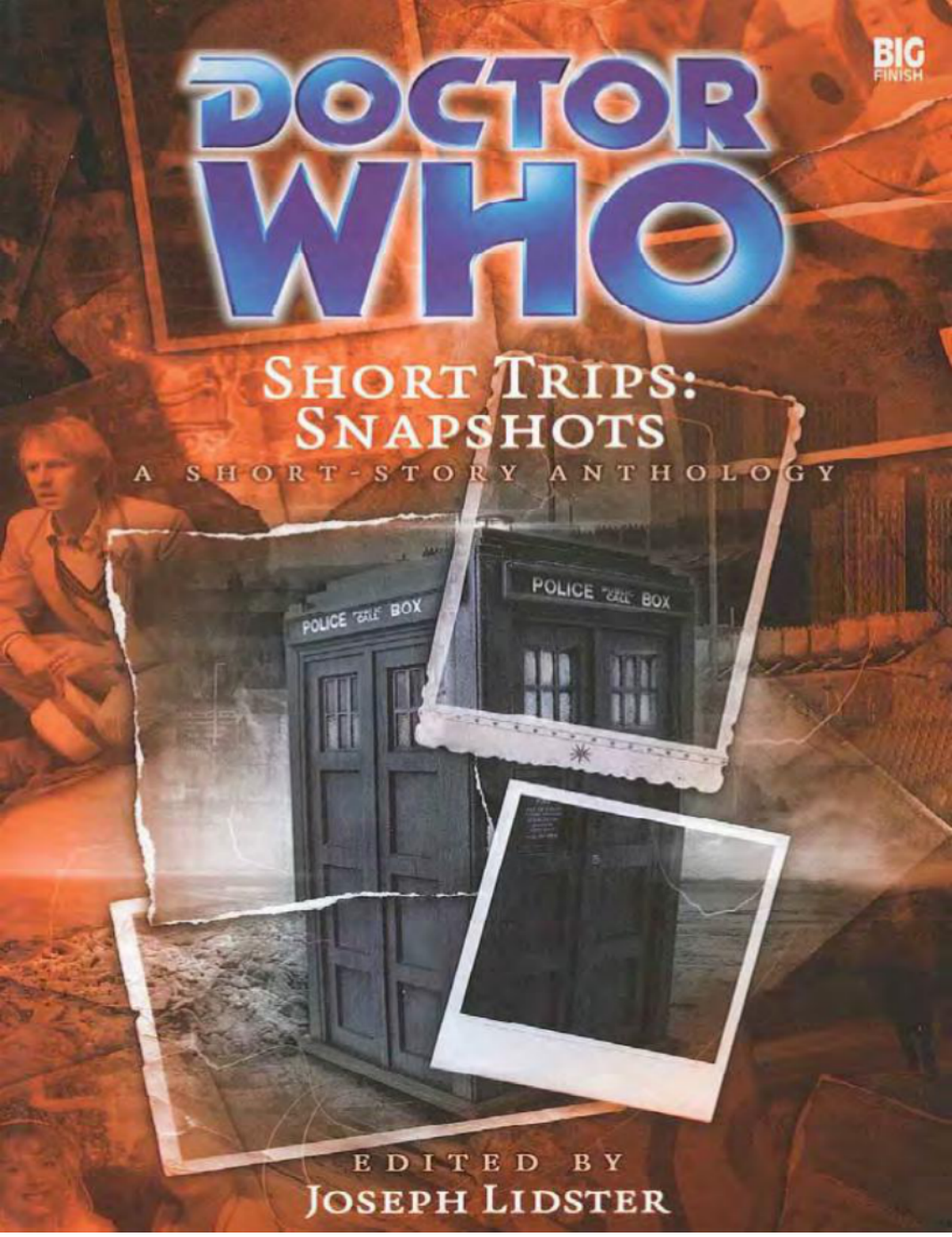
BIG FINISH

DOCTOR WHO

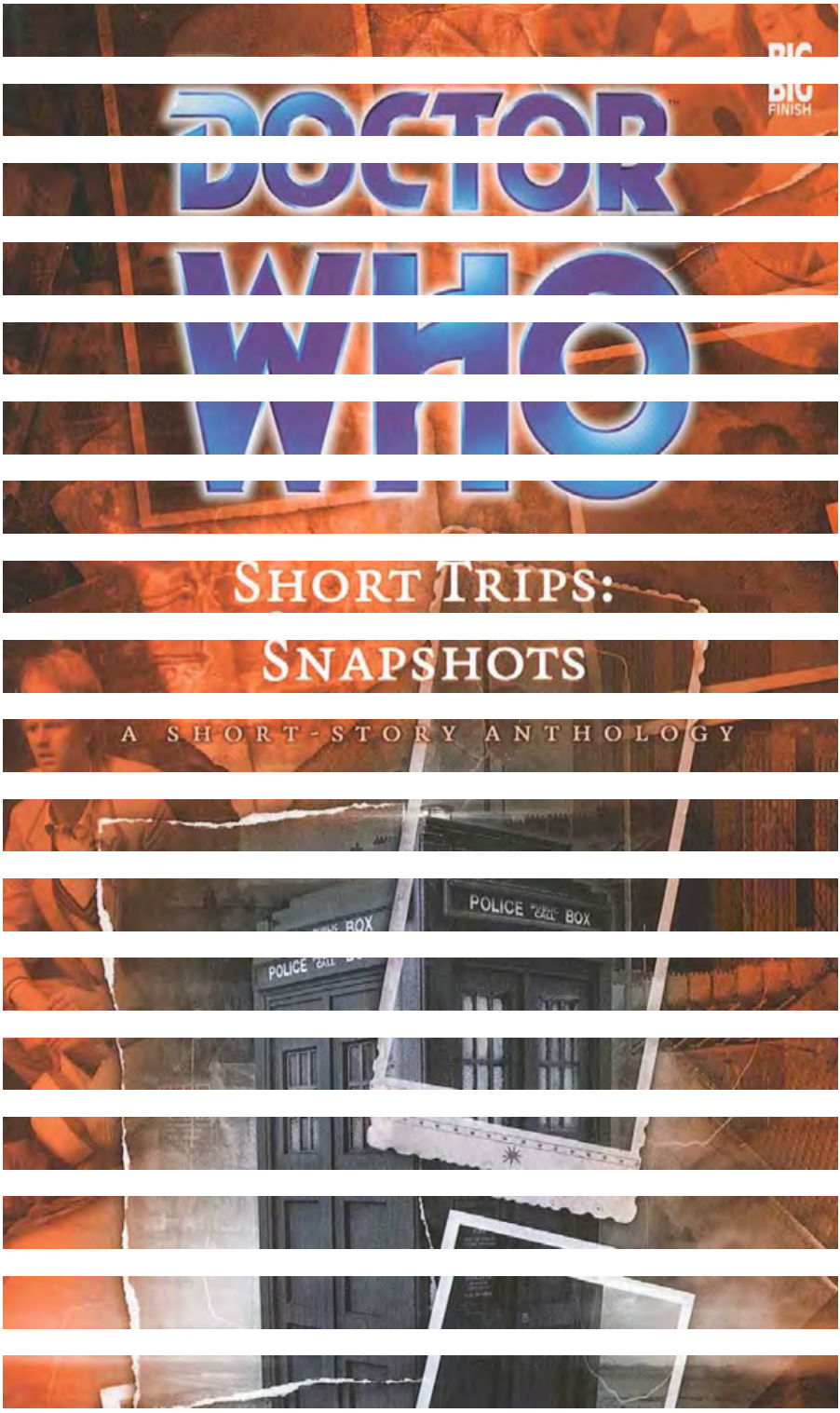
SHORT TRIPS: SNAPSHOTS

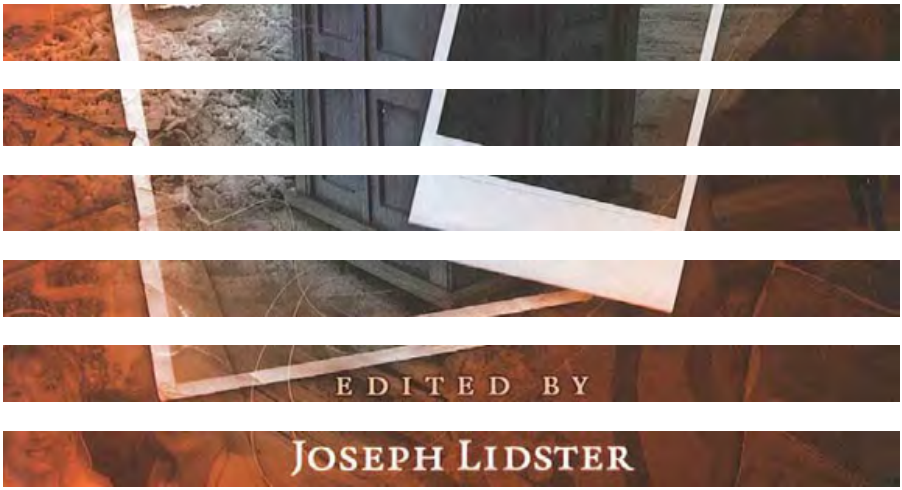
A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY



EDITED BY

JOSEPH LIDSTER


DOCTOR WHO
SHORT TRIPS:
SNAPSHOTS
A SHORT-STORY ANTHOLOGY
POLICE BOX



CONTENTS

Golem Lizzie Hopley **1**

Indian Summer James Goss **8**

All of Beyond Helen Raynor **25**

The Eyes Have It Colin Harvey **37**

The Misadventure of Mark Thorne

44

Andy Frankham

Attachments Scott Handcock **50**

There's Something About Mary Simon Guerrier **58**

My Hero Stuart Manning **73**

Plight of the Monkrah John Davies **80**

Remain in Light Eddie Robson **97**

In Case of Emergencies Ian Farrington **118**

Puppeteer Benjamin Adams **125**

Osskah Gary Owen **136**

Piecemeal James Swallow **151**

The Report Gary Russell **166**

You Had Me at Verify Username and Password

181

Stel Pavlou

She Knew Nigel Fairs **194**

The Glarn Strategy Brian Dooley **204**

Salva Mea Joseph Lidster **228**

The Sorrows of Vienna Steven Savile **238**

Fanboys Paul Magrs **254**

About the Authors

268

Golem

Lizzie Hopley

An Adventure of the Golem, with the Second Doctor

'... we've got exactly 24 hours, Alan, to transform this low-bracket semi into a palatial home...'

'... I must confess, Julie, I've always thought fondant was a slightly pretentious word to use about potato...'

'... the feeling in the studio is pretty low right now, we haven't seen a run of luck as bad as this in weeks...'

'... and today she's here to ask – will the internet ruin her marriage for the second time...'

'... the thing is, darling, you will never be a star while you look like Vicky Pollard...'

The garbled, tinny voices seep through the earth, where it waits.

Where it has always waited. Over the voices comes a burst of group

laughter, scornful and harsh and not that far away. The sound streaks like lightning finding a channel through the earth and into the dormant mass of waiting parts. It lies in the ground. And hears. This is no

dramatic awakening, no iconic movie moment – just a quiet

underground shift of mud and shale, of leaking gasses and ancient

diverted rivers where it lies. The moment isn't even felt by the young mum pushing her kid directly over it, but buried in the stinking earth beneath the derelict housing estate – quite suddenly – it lives.

'Keep that one on!'

'I wanna see the film!'

'You have to pay for that, it's scrambled.'

'That's just your screen.'

The words punctuate like shrill percussion over the hum of power

lines and the gurgle of sewers. It lies and waits some more. It is used to waiting, time is all it knows, history has built the layers of the earth and it has felt the thousands of years that have scarred and seared the packed veins under the throbbing metropolis above. But the waiting is getting less comfortable now and other senses are being born.

'... and, of course, to get piece of mind from the lie detector...'

'... with such a pretty box and the usual 14-days returns option...'

1

'... and not a bad scent too, Marie...'

'... you know what I have to ask...'

'... but there's no doubt about it, this is really soft on the tongue...'

'... deal or no deal?'

Such noise. Lights hum, electronic signals thud into the ground from the airwaves, hundreds of voices spread through handheld devices and

TV sets, mining their messages into the floor. If it could feel pain it would be screaming, screaming from sheer confusion, but confusion is too new a concept as all it is now is mud and rock and fibrous

possibility. The fibres broaden and swell in the packed earth seeking a focus, a beacon to fix on amidst the chaos.

'Shut your wailing little trap before I shut it for you!'

A baby's screams echo through underground drains, a twist of lonely

pipe music vibrates the tangle of shopping trolleys in the alleyway

above, and across the estate, in a derelict flat, the gang of monstrous teenagers watch a TV programme.

'Turn over, we're missin' it!'

'It's not started yet.'

'They do interviews with the crowd outside first...'

'All right, all right!'

The stream of digital information crowds the muddy brain and seems

to give it thought. Its consciousness closes on the perceived scene above like some slow-moving fish mouthing at flies. And for the first time, it thinks.

'Our Dave auditioned last week in Leeds and they wouldn't even give him the train fare home.'

'Your Dave's no good.'

'He sings in clubs.'

'Yeah, he does SexyBack *– both voices.'*

'Yeah, but he looks like a muppet.'

'Who d'you think you are mockney-boy?'

'I mean an actual muppet – that scientist one, the thin one with no mouth.'

'Shut up and watch will you!'

'Ahh, look, she's got hair extensions and everything. Bet they cost a

fortune.'

'She's with her mum, ahhh.'

'No way is she 17, you have to be 17.'

'Beaker.'

'You what?'

'The muppet.'

Mup-pet. Mock-ney. Leeds. These things. These are important

things. It will seek out these things, find how they smell, what they mean, bring them down into the earth.

2

'So many people.'

'Where'd they all come from?'

'Dave travelled from Widnes.'

'There must be hundreds.'

'Thousands – and they've all got numbers.'

Moving lights and music fill the darkened room as its consciousness

travels up through the ground to meet this crowd. It notices the buzz from the glass, the reflection in the eyes of the watching faces that are mere twisted shapes to its dark mud-clad eyes. Features glow in the

garish light from the blaring set, each youthful countenance warped and deformed, a monstrous pack soaking up their digital meal like starved addicts.

'No way is she getting in, she's mingin'.'

'Got a good voice though, like Lily Allen.'

'Yeah, and Lily Allen mings, who needs two of them?'

'And who's Shane Walsh but Will Young for the blind?'

A roar of group laughter echoes through the stone-cold radiator and

shakes the ground.

'See, she's out. She minged.'

'... I go ahead and smi-i-ile...'

'That one's good.'

'He's fat.'

'Yeah but you can lose that can't you, have it sucked out.'

'Ew!'

'You can – with tubes...'

'Bet they'll keep him as a sympathy vote.'

'Like that binman.'

'Yeah.'

'... that's my goooo-al!'

'Ah, man, that one looks like our nan – why do they let them in? It's just cruel.'

'That's the point.'

'Why did they reject the Lily Allen one, then?'

'Nose and teeth.'

'What?'

'Nose was too wide between the eyes – like Britney.'

'BRITNEY SHEARS!'

'And the teeth needed too much work – they want an instant star, they spot these things early on.'

'What about that one?'

'Too common.'

'What's that mean!'

‘Funny ears – like a cartoon.’

‘But he’s good!’

3

‘Looks like that Steve who hangs round the arcade.’

‘No star quality – bet you he’s out.’

‘He’s out.’

‘Ahh!’

The baby screams, the lively pipe music echoes faintly round the

trolleys but as the wretched parade of desperate souls punch out their revered and sacred lyrics with the reedy voices of the pre-damned, deep within the earth something shifts. An immense slackening ache floods age-old muddy veins, igniting two coal-red eyes that glow as if

answering a personal call. Flickering hotly with the static of the screen, they open and for the first time, after an eternity of darkness, it sees. It sees the swarm of monstrous faces swimming before it in the darkened flat, calling out to the creature through the ground.

The gang is young, not yet worn and torpid with age, and blood rages through them with adrenalin born of anger and self-loathing, for these are monsters too and the hot coals burn with recognition. Mutated from birth or life, some have been bred locally, others have travelled from far-off places to meet on this night.

It sees the girl that sits chewing her hair in the corner of the torn sofa.

She is painfully thin. Her skin puckers up her arms like a rolled-up umbrella, sinews rope wasting muscles like bleached parasitic vines

searching the soil for sap-filled roots. It has felt such things in the earth, thin strings of failing life pushing against concrete. The creature will find her food; it will help her take it in and grow strong. Across the room, another girl paints gloss liberally over a gashed slit of a mouth set deeply in a face prematurely creased with unease. The boy next to her can’t keep his hands from his face as so many of them can’t, self-consciously masking sickened, acne-pitted skin and substandard

features.

The creature stirs in the ground, feeding off the pain and fury as the television screams its poison into resentful ears. This is an army in waiting, crying out for change, for a leader, for payback. Deep beneath the alleyway, at the foot of their estate, a body is formed from the compacted chemicals and waste-infused clay. For a multitude of years it has lain here, mere potential, history flowing through it like rain, washing it clean, depositing silt, then ash then blood – the thud of axes and the roll of cartwheels, the stench of petrol and steel flash of rails –

and the people, the billions of people marching, fleeing, weeping,

laughing, dying and constantly being fed into the ground.

A sea of faces passes before the coal-red eyes. They are papered over every wall of the flat, hundreds of them torn from cheap magazines.

Every face in every picture bears the strong, confident marks of ink and crayon, lines that divide up and section each into sections showing its various perfections or faults: 'nose too wide', 'no cheekbones', 'eyes 4

too small', 'weak jaw'... This darkly papered den throbs with a desire to understand rules, a homemade centre of study dedicated to defining the laws behind the social rejection of an imperfect human face. Held fast in their labour, the gang of outcasts chant at their screen as each auditionee appears before the judges and is accepted or condemned.

'Ladette!' 'Yarco!' 'Peasant!' 'PEASANT!'

As each name punches through the concrete to the creature in the

earth, the swathes of mud and clay form lumpenly round its limbs,

giving it a shape, a face. Beneath its burning eyes, the scent of packed and stinking earth blocks new senses as it struggles to breathe. It is tired of waiting now, tired of the dark, the pipe music from the alleyway, the constant need to scream. It scans the wall of faces, searching for its own category, its own name – the name that will be written on its forehead when it emerges from the earth to lead and be led.

The anger of the gang swells the motion of dull, throbbing life

through the veins of mud and clay – they are ready to leave this place. It can hear their questions: *'When do we start?' 'What are our targets?'*

The ground thuds beneath hundreds of feet. More creatures are arriving from neighbouring estates, hundreds of deformed, rejected souls

gathering for instruction. It can hear them asking, searching for a leader.

It can see the funny, little man watching them arrive, perched on the wall of the alleyway asking if anyone has seen ‘the one with the name’.

Deep in the earth, the coal-red eyes burn fiercely as a name appears seared into earthy flesh. A black mouth opens, trying to taste life. It is not afraid of the little man. It has heard him roaming above like the many tramps that live on the estate, trying to lure out life with pipe music. The creature knows all of Earth’s stories – the one with the wolf, the one with the troll, the one with the piper – these are not real

monsters. Real monsters are made by the earth, summoned out of the

dirt by the oppressed and the rejected to avenge the evils of the world, to right a balance in nature.

‘BIG SCREEN’, ‘LITTLE SCREEN’, ‘RADIO-FACE!’, ‘TRAILER

TRASH’, ‘SCALLIE’, ‘HOOD-RAT, ‘CHIP-SHOP SCUM!’

The labels rain like a shower of arrows hailing a battle. The

revolution has begun. Power surges through the ground to the

drumming of feet from the estate as the gang summons a leader. They

will strip the faces from the walls and hand them out, each taking a target. Every perfect face will be corrected to new standards – their standards. A new society will be forged where defects and deficiencies are made and glorified. The army will spread like an avenging force

into the city. It will gain in number – the earth will send out an army of monsters to take revenge on a sick world. And amongst their number

will be their greatest weapon, a creature brought forth from earth and clay, named by its creators to live unvanquished throughout the ages

until its name be stripped from it, waging war and vengeance on those

who oppress them, stopping only when everything returns to the earth and only dust remains.

A crack forms in the earth around the creature, its limbs fighting the tight ground as it struggles to be born. The desperate cries for leadership drag a life from the earth that is old and new and deadly. The top of its muddy head breaks through the crust of the ground, sending a heap of twisted shopping trolleys crashing in the alleyway. The burning coals sear through the dark, the nostrils flare as it smells life and its mouth opens to make the scream of a newborn but nothing hits the air but the hot stench of burning earth. It sways for a moment, choking on its

muteness and then it sees the little man, sitting on the alleyway wall, taking a small stick from his mouth. He is dripping wet, there is water falling from the sky. Almost free of the muddy earth, the creature opens its mouth, tasting the rain.

Its burning eyes reflect in the puddle that amasses at its muddy feet and it stares down, seeing itself for the first time. It sees a girl, dressed in a tracksuit who, aside from a slight thinness of mouth and flatness of cheek, seems quite normal – apart from a ragged paper stuck to her

forehead and two, burning red coals for eyes.

'And a creature was brought forth out of the dirt...'

It hears the voice, the scuff of shoes hitting the ground.

'... and breathed into its nostrils were the fumes of life and the dirt became a living soul...'

It turns away from the reflection of the girl to find the voice, trying to find its balance in the wide open space of the world.

'... which stood erect, in its trainers, ready to confront the evils of its time.'

The glowing eyes fix on a small tramp of a man, in chequered

trousers and crumpled jacket, holding the small hollow stick. He is old, his cheeks sag and his eyes hold a sadness even older than his face. The nose is bent and too long, the dark brows arched and unruly, his is a rejected face but the creature is wary, it sees the stick remembering the music echoing above the ground, lilting childish notes played to lure it out into the open. It has known rats – it most be smarter than a rat with this man.

‘Well, I suppose you’re a lot less ugly than most.’

Ug-ly. It has heard this word many times. Its swollen veins throb.

‘Believe it or not, most of them aren’t even dressed when they come out.’

The tramp is too far away to reach. Clods of earth splash into the

puddle as the creature convulses its fingers into fists. From across the alleyway, the chanting becomes a roar.

‘IN-BRED HOODIE PRAMFACE CHAV!’

6

A wave of rage hits the creature from within the earth and the eyes

burn fiercely, pain searing within its own lumpen head. *These words. Wrong words. Wrong names.* Tight muscles, born of urban clay, ache with violence and the black mouth rips open in a soundless roar.

A splatter of mud. The tramp is approaching, eyes narrowed, mouth

bunched into a frown.

‘It’s no use,’ he is saying. *‘You were born only for one thing, I’m afraid. And I must admit, you were very good at it. No one expected terror to come from within the earth – everyone so busy looking at the skies.’*

The creature opens and shuts its hollow mouth to the rain, hearing the cries of an army raging in its ears, feeling the raw pain which has

created its birth wanting to start a massacre. It was born for only one thing – and it will be very good at it. It focuses on the sagging face. It’s only an arm’s length away now and the muscles that bunch under the

tracksuit are stronger than any human’s. The mouth opens again with its invitation to death and a flow of dark wet clay pours down its glistening chin.

The tramp shakes his head, shaggy, wet hair hanging mournfully,

ready to be ripped out at the roots.

‘I’m very sorry.’

He has a tongue. Why does it not have a tongue? The tramp's eyes

flash briefly in the dark: they are not coal-red; they are black, sharp and unmoving.

'Golems with a voice can be rather lovely but I'm afraid you quiet ones have no heart.'

The creature struggles to lift its trainered feet out of the mud,

suddenly afraid. It needs to take this man's tongue for itself, feel the warmth in its mouth, blood feeding the rage.

'One day,' the man's tongue continues to say, *'it will be time for the Earth to avenge the crimes of humans. But you must have a conscience.*

A heartless avenger is just a monster after all.'

As the roar of its army soars above the heavy rain, a dirt-streaked

trainer emerges from the ground. Quicker than lightning, too quick for mud and clay, the little man snatches out a hand and rips the piece of paper from the creature's muddy head. Caught fast between the motion of its first step and the incapacity of rage, the Golem freezes, feeling the heat of its eyes die in the night. It happens so swiftly, it hardly has time to register its own demise, the futile cries of its creators, the revolution turning in on itself, the yawning future of bloodshed and mutilation changing course, it only catches the sad smile of the little man as he reads before its body turns back to dust and disintegrates into the silent earth once again.

7

Indian Summer

James Goss

An Adventure of Suresh Parekh,

with the First Doctor and Susan

Summer 1816

Suresh was told about the ghost on his first day at the restaurant.

Rawson, the drunk white manager, stretched a lazy arm towards a

table in the corner. ‘Watch out for that,’ he yawned. ‘That table is haunted, fellow.’ He scratched away at the sweat on his collar band, and waited for a response. Suresh simply dipped his head from side to side, and smiled his non-committal smile. Rawson led him on to another table. ‘Be careful of our ghost, that’s all,’ he continued. ‘Never pays his bill.’

The hotel stood on a beach, a rough hour’s ride from Bombay. The road there was called ‘difficult’ by the ladies and ‘interestin’’ by the men. But the bay was considered marvellous and unspoilt, and had been ever since an Irishman with little better to do with his money had built the hotel. Its simple white structure, with even simpler plumbing, had long been a fashionable weekend retreat for tired husbands and forgotten wives.

The restaurant was as simple as the hotel – curried mutton and lamb chops, thick napkins and heavy cutlery, looking out at that perfect, simple beach. Suresh was proud to be working there, and even prouder of his several uniforms, each of them elaborately starched and laid out to dry in the goatyard by his mother. True, some of the men were rude and became dismissive as the hours grew later and they became drunker. And, naturally, some of the women wouldn’t meet his eye. But the art of good service was to ignore all this and present the meals in the timeliest fashion.

He asked his mother about ghosts. He’d never seen any and was curious. She smiled. ‘You have nothing to worry about from ghosts, my child,’ she said, carefully kneading the next day’s flatbreads, ‘until you’ve lived enough to fear them.’ Suresh didn’t like it when his mother pretended to wisdom. But he ducked his head and went

to work.

Mid Summer 1816

Sometimes it rained so much you couldn't separate the sea from the sky. The beach had turned to slurry and Suresh waded through it with difficulty, keeping his eyes fixed on the distant lights of the hotel, somehow friendly and safe. As he watched, the lights all flickered and then died, plunging the beach into darkness. Suresh did his best to run faster. Rawson was standing on the dark veranda, with a cigar.

'You're late,' he said. His sour expression didn't lift as he surveyed the dripping form of his waiter. 'You've just missed the ghost.'

Late Summer 1816

It was a long night, and Suresh wished he could sit down and rest for a minute. There were only three customers left in the restaurant, and they had been there for six hours, drinking and gambling and swearing. They came often, the three of them, thundering down across the sands on their sweating horses, whooping as they barrelled straight up to the restaurant, shouting out drinks orders as they dismounted. The three men, soldiers all, were called Brown, Davis and Partridge. They spent wildly, and Rawson was always pleased to see them. Suresh was hoping for a big tip when the evening finally wound down. Until then, he stood patiently to one side in the shadows of the darkened restaurant, waiting the outcome of the game. Briefly, Suresh turned away to check that there was

enough soda in the siphon. When he glanced back, the three soldiers were no longer alone.

A fourth sat at their table, silently watching as they dealt out the next hand. The stranger was ancient, his eyes dark and cold, his expression imperious. Suresh just stood there. This, he knew, was the ghost. There was something about the man – the coldness, the silence, the sense that he somehow wasn't there.

Brown looked up from his hand first, started, then gave a laugh.

'Look, lads!' he slurred. 'Care to join us, you old devil?' he said, sly.

Davis and Partridge looked on in horror.

'It's only old Devil Jack,' laughed Brown. 'He's why I always pick this table. I wanted you fellows to play cards with him! Come Uncle Lucifer! I'll deal you in.'

And with that, he dealt the ghost a hand.

The ghost still didn't speak, or even acknowledge the men. But

Suresh could feel the room get colder and darker, the gaslight dimming. The world seemed to hold its breath – even the sound of the beach was stilled, as though the waves were waiting to see what happened next

'Boy!' barked Brown. 'Pour the old devil a drink! Come, come – whisky and sulphur!'

Suresh, glad of action, measured out a glass, and marked it down against Brown's bill. He approached the table and laid the drink down next to the apparition. He didn't seem to notice, just

continued his unmoving stare out to the sea. Brown laughed again at his own wit, and this time Davis and Partridge joined in a little. Then, slowly, calmly, the ghost turned his head, as though becoming aware of the three and focusing carefully on them each in turn. His infinite gaze settled on Brown, who was holding his glass to the ghost in mock salute. Brown froze, trying to lock eyes with the ghost, but he was turning away.

Casually, the ghost reached out a hand, as withered and twisted as an old tree – an arm through which Suresh could gently perceive the velvet of the tablecloth. The hand reached out to his offered cards, and hovered over them. Davis gave a nervous chuckle. The ghost tapped the cards slowly and then shook his head sadly. The apparition had been silent – but the noise of that tapping rang out across the room. Then the hand flicked up and pointed at Davis. And the ghost was gone.

'He was... he was... at me!' Davis said, several times before anyone noticed him. Partridge was mumbling a little hymn to himself. Brown was simply laughing.

'He wouldn't play me, would old Jackodemus! Maybe next time. Ah, well!' He reached over, downed the ghost's drink, and called for more.

Winter 1816

The next time the soldiers came to visit, it was just Brown and Partridge. They were subdued in their play. A few days after their last visit, Davis had been killed in a fall. After Partridge went to bed,

Brown sat there at the table, two drinks poured, waiting until dawn.

Suresh carefully swept away the broken glass before serving breakfast.

Much to Mr Rawson's regret, the soldiers didn't come again after that.

10

Spring 1819

Suresh noticed something from the corner of his eye. He was now head waiter and he felt a pride in arranging the restaurant as best as he could at the end of each evening, cleaning the tables by moonlight. He turned. There'd been the tiniest movement behind him.

He felt a chill as he realised he was facing the haunted table. Just for an instant, he thought he saw the ghost of the old man there, but it was gone. Suresh stood there, clutching his dustpan and brash to his chest – his heart beating, listening to the reassuring rise and fall of the sea, not daring to move – until suddenly and noisily his brother came banging through from the kitchens, singing happily.

Summer 1822

A lapsed duchess and her sullen daughter were sat, enjoying a late lunch. Mother and daughter were indulging in the common Indian traveller's game of outdoing each other in tales of woe about the climate. The daughter was telling an elaborate tale of a mosquito bite, while the mother was regularly patting herself down with a handkerchief soaked in lemon water.

Suresh drifted past, serving course after course discreetly. He'd discovered that the more visitors complained of loss of appetite, the more they managed to eat. He came back after a while to find that the daughter was now – of all things – complaining of a chill. Imperceptibly, he despatched a boy to fetch a shawl down from her room. He turned away, momentarily distracted by a colonel's harrumphing search for pince-nez. When he turned back, he could see that the ladies had been joined by a stranger. It took him seconds before he recognised the distinguished old ghost, and the look of cold disinterest with which he stared past the ladies.

He hurried over.

'Yes?' asked the old duchess imperiously. Suresh had discovered that the secret of service was to be over-attentive at only exactly the most welcome of moments.

'Is everything all right, madam?' he asked, trying to keep the tremor from his voice. He felt terrified standing so close to the forbidding, spectral form.

'Everything is quite all right, thank you,' replied the daughter, hugging the shawl close to her. 'The sea breeze is a most welcome refreshment.' She coughed, delicately, into a lace handkerchief.

At this the ghost turned and stared at her, his glance slowly focusing on her like the grinding of a millstone. His hand tapped the table.

Suresh accepted the puzzle and moved away. Clearly the ladies could not perceive their guest. Perhaps that was how things worked

in English Society these days – it was so finely tuned as to what was, and what was not, permissible to be noticed.

He kept an eye on their table over the next few days. They had no return visitations, but the daughter's chill became worse until, on advice from a visiting practitioner, they broke short their visit and returned to Bombay. The young girl later died from a fever caught from the mosquito bite. It was then that Suresh started his notebook.

Summer 1824

A young girl who Suresh had never met before asked for her usual table, and called him by his name. Her clothes were remarkable, and her manner almost embarrassingly friendly. She poured out an excited description of a visit to the Taj Mahal she claimed to have made that morning, before running out ofwords and breath and simply giggling. He bowed and brought her lemonade, then kept an eye on her in case she made moves on the cutlery. Instead she just sat, glancing round the restaurant as though looking for something that wasn't there.

Spring 1827

Suresh wasn't surprised to see the ghost at their table, but he was startled by what happened next. Two mining engineers, Stapley and Ashton, had spent most of their stay in a heated discussion over mineral rights. They stormed into the restaurant, cussing the barman for gin as they stalked towards the table overlooking the sea. It wasn't long before Suresh noticed the ghost seated calmly at their table.

Ashton put down his menu. ‘I say…’ he began, and hiccupped.

‘Do we know you, sir?’

Stapley didn’t even glance up. ‘Another of your friends joined us, Ashton?’ His tone was bitter. ‘Just perhaps he’ll have some useful advice I should consider. Tell your dear friend I’m not interested.’

Ashton shook his head, and for the first time that evening, set down his glass. ‘Look here… old fellow… I don’t know him. Sir, who are you?’ Stapley coughed sarcastically.

Slowly, like a boat turning on calm waters, the ghost’s head drifted round towards Stapley. A long smile began to creep across his face. Suresh took an involuntary step backwards.

Ashton spoke again. ‘Look here, Dick, I think there’s something up with our guest.’

Stapley didn’t respond. He was still ostentatiously reading the

menu. It happened before Suresh could prevent it. Ashton’s hand reached out to grab the ghost’s shoulder, and slipped through it. At his cry, every head in the restaurant turned. Suresh could hear the sound of forks resting suddenly against plates. Of muttering.

‘Don’t make a scene, William,’ muttered Stapley, without looking up. Ashton simply sat there, cradling his hand, his breath coming in gasps. Suresh heard the inebriated bark of Rawson’s voice across the restaurant. ‘What’s all this then, Suresh?’ Over the years, Rawson had left the smooth management of the hotel increasingly to Suresh. His journeys outside his private office were increasingly erratic and usually unfortunate. This was one of those

occasions.

Suresh half-turned, not wanting to break away from the scene, but also aware that Rawson wasn't in a state to help the crisis.

'Sir –' he began.

'Damn it, Suresh! I leave this place to you, and I find you once again seating *your* ghost at the best table!' Rawson was proceeding unsteadily across the floor. His arms were swinging as he walked, an uncomfortable reminder that the hotel owner had once been a prize fighter. It was Rawson's habit to blame anyone in sight for any unfortunate occurrence–he believed it did his customers the power of good to see a native being cursed out in a proper style.

The effect of the word *ghost* on the other diners was dramatic.

The effect on Ashton was worse – he was staring at his hand and beginning to whimper. Suresh had learned the art of placation – the right words for everything from stale bread through to over-done steak. But, for once, he couldn't think of anything placating to say. He'd run out of time.

Rawson arrived at the table, a bunched hand pointing in the ghost's face. 'You! I've had my fill of you! Sir!' The fist began to shake.

The ghost continued staring calmly at Stapley, who, engrossed in the menu, remained oblivious.

'Answer me! You... demon!' Rawson reached back to strike, but suddenly Ashton was on his feet.

'Don't touch it!' he called out. 'Please! It...'

Rawson's fist passed through the ghost and connected neatly with

Ashton's chin, felling him instantly.

Suresh allowed himself to shut his eyes for an instant. He just listened to the inevitable gasps, the sounds of male curses and female cries, of chairs being scraped back, of one or two glasses being knocked over.

Then he opened his eyes, and turned to face the room. 'Ladies and gentlemen –' he began, raising his hands to stem the onslaught.

13

Behind him, Rawson was gazing unsteadily at his fist, and at Ashton, sprawled on the carpet.

The youngest and angriest male diner had reached their tableaux.

'Look here!' he barked. 'We demand some sort of explanation!'

Suresh faltered. You English, he thought, always demanding, never accepting. Your beds are never comfortable enough, your bathrooms never clean enough, your food never quite right. Any situation can always be shouted at. For once, it would be nice if you'd try our way, just sitting back and seeing what happens.

He said none of this. Instead he said, 'Sir, Mr Rawson, the manager, will explain everything,' bowed, turned on his heel and left the restaurant.

Later, Suresh wrote down in his notebook:

Mr Rawson retired back to England. All correspondence c/o Miss Rawson, older sister.

Mr Ashton & Mr Stapley left the hotel that night,

returning to their small mining concern. Mr Stapley killed a week later in a mining explosion. Mr Ashton lost the use of a hand in the same blast.

Summer 1829

If Suresh had less time for the restaurant now he was manager, he didn't show it. Bookings had taken a slight dip after the retirement of Mr Rawson – no matter how badly he had run things, the English hated change.

But affairs had improved since the manager's removal. Partly, this was due to Suresh's mother arriving as housekeeper, and his sister quietly taking over work on the books. Both were as thorough and cautious in running the hotel as if it were their own house.

Suresh wasn't really surprised. We let women run our homes, and yet the English insist that men run their hotels. Is it any wonder their sheets are filthy, the dishes are cracked and the bathrooms not their best?

Miss Rawson back in London seemed perfectly content with the new arrangement, and positively delighted with the large cheques she regularly received from Suresh. Used to living on a small annuity, she placed the same trust in Suresh she placed in her bankers, and was a charming correspondent, especially as she rarely mentioned her younger brother.

Suresh's notebook had not been updated with sightings of the ghost for over two years.

Autumn 1830

‘I would like a table, please,’ said the young woman.

Suresh smoothly escorted her to a quiet corner with a good view out across the bay. He was used to the English habit of letting women travel alone, even if he did not personally approve of it. It was unusual for one so young to travel in this fashion, however. Especially as she wasn’t staying in the hotel. She’d simply walked in and asked for a table.

Suresh looked at the girl – there was something familiar about her. Certainly her appearance was remarkable – her dress was of the fashion, but her hair was built up in an elaborate, elfin tower. Her almond eyes darted around the room, and he found himself speculating on her heritage – her bearing was certainly genteel, but was that the slightest hint of unfortunate mulatto in her complexion?

He cast a nervous glance at the finest cutlery.

She asked if there were any local specialities that he’d recommend, ordered smoothly and sat back, not looking so much at the view as at the restaurant. Suresh was quietly pleased that, as with most novice travellers, the girl was surprised to discover that her Bombay Duck was actually a fish.

When the food was carried away and the bill presented, she asked Suresh a question. ‘Excuse me – but have there been any... unusual things happening here?’

Suresh didn’t even pause, but simply bobbed his head. ‘Why, no, madam.’

The woman frowned. ‘Not – an old man? Behaving strangely?’

It was with more difficulty that Suresh bobbed his head and repeated his answer. She surprised him by grinning at his reply, and tipping him handsomely. He watched her leave the restaurant and walk across the beach. It was most likely she'd heard the stories from Bombay gossip. But what if she knew something about the ghost? His natural discretion told him not to ask. There was something about her... something familiar.

It was only later that day, when he was wondering whether or not to mark this in his notebook, that he was startled to realise that the young girl had spoken to him in his own dialect. And that he hadn't remarked on this at the time was even more startling.

Summer 1840

Suresh missed his mother. He often hadn't understood her when growing up, but he'd found her quiet wisdom in the running of the hotel a great comfort. Near the end, she'd told him something most strange. 'That ghost is not so bad, you know,' she had said, with a

smile. He'd asked her to explain, but the very old woman had simply drifted off to sleep.

Miss Rawson sent him a charming letter of condolences from London. He replied with his best wishes, and reassurances of the hotel's continued good running.

Suresh loved his wife, but she lacked his mother's abilities with the hotel. Suresh found himself in the rare position of recruiting an English manager – a man called Mr McGuire, who smiled rarely but didn't drink and seemed content with the books.

Winter 1840

The couple were perfectly delightful, but their baby cried loudly.

Suresh discreetly placed them at a table away from the other diners

and towards the sea, hoping that if the sound of the waves didn't

calm the infant, it would at least drown out the noise.

He continued with his service of breakfast, until he heard the

lady's gasp. He turned and saw, to his horror, the ghost sat calmly at their table. He hurried across.

'What is the meaning of this?' demanded the husband. 'This

man... can you move him to another table? The old fool's upsetting

my wife and child!'

Suresh felt a cold horror in his old bones.

'Sir,' he replied in his lowest voice. 'This gentleman is not like

our other guests...'

The husband waved his excuses away. 'So, he's a doddering old

fool, yes. But you stop him from botherin' my family.'

Suresh pressed gently on. 'Perhaps, sir, it would be wisest if I

move you to another table. The sahib is best not disturbed.' Cutting off further protests, Suresh put on his widest smile. 'He is in our

care and I would be only too delighted to offer you whatever

refreshments you'd care for on his account.' Then, with his

smoothest tones, he ushered them away to another table.

The mollified husband settled the wife and child down, sipping at

a glass of champagne without complaint. 'Crack'd fool,' he

muttered, staring across at the unfocused old man.

‘Phillip,’ asked his wife gently. ‘Why’d he stare at the child so?’

Suresh shuddered as he left the room.

‘The baby died, didn’t it?’ Suresh asked the ghost.

It was very late one night, and he found the ghost sat at a table, looking out across the dark sea. The ghost turned slowly, without focusing on him.

‘Please, sir, don’t look at me!’ Suresh cried out, shutting his eyes tight. But that only made him more afraid. When he finally opened

them, the ghost was gone.

Summer 1842

Suresh recognised the girl from 12 years ago. She seemed little altered, but then that was the way with the English, resisting all forms of change.

She seemed a little distracted, anxious even. Suresh stepped neatly forward, at his most welcoming. ‘A pleasure to see you again, madam. May I show you to your usual table?’

The girl seemed startled. ‘Does that – have I? Oh…’ She sighed, thoughts flying across her face, until her mouth puckered in sudden disappointment. ‘Yes, please.’

She followed him meekly to a table and settled herself down. She looked distracted, almost edgy.

Suresh handed her a menu. ‘My compliments. You speak my language very well, madam. Not many have taken such trouble.’

‘Do I?’ Again, a slightly trapped look. ‘Oh! Yes. Well, thank you.

It's nothing, really. Oh, this looks lovely!'

She was all smiles as she leafed through the menu. Suresh was surprised by this level of charm. It was normally exactly the behaviour he'd come to expect from people planning on sneaking out without settling the bill.

Suddenly, she folded the menu shut and smiled an eager young girl's grin. 'Some lemonade. A glass would be lovely!'

Suresh bowed.

She drank the lemonade in indecent fast gulps, wiping her hand across her mouth. She seemed eager to pay and be off, getting up and darting out.

'That was so nice. Really,' she said, heading towards the door. As she left, she turned. 'Tell me,' she asked, 'last time I came, I forget – did I mention my grandfather?'

Suresh was startled. 'Why, no, madam, not that I recall.'

Again, that look of disappointment. 'Oh. I see. Well, thank you!'

And then, another strange, bright smile and she was gone back across the beach.

Spring 1846

It was a troubled time in the region, but business held steady. Suresh's beloved wife brought him children, and more sons than daughters. She grew happily wider around the hips, and Suresh noticed a gradual greying of her hair. And yet, he thought, I am much the same. I am not slowing down, my hotel is prospering. I

have much to be proud of.

17

A note arrived from England. Miss Rawson regretted to inform him of the death of his old employer, noting quietly that he'd died in a sanatorium after an illness of many years. 'It's a blessed release, in many ways, both for him and for those of us who knew him.'

He began to draft a courteous reply. On an impulse, he added an invitation to come out and see her hotel.

Winter 1847

'I couldn't have enjoyed supper more,' said Miss Rawson.

'I'm so glad,' said Suresh. He would have waited on her personally, but there'd been yet another problem with the laundry woman.

Miss Rawson was a dignified lady. Not pretty, by any means, but she wore her age in a way that reminded Suresh slightly of his mother. Wisps of grey hair poked out of her cap, and her glasses flashed against the oil lamps as she spoke. He suspected she was slightly tipsy on the excellent wine he'd personally selected for her table.

She pronounced herself delighted with her room, and surprised by much of what she'd seen of India. 'I am dreading the voyage back!' she told Suresh. She had her Murray's guidebook with her, and lots of plans. 'Of course, I've had a few new ideas tonight. Who'd have thought I'd have had such a charming companion at dinner?' she

said.

Suresh paused in the turning down of her bed.

'Such a lovely old man – so distinguished. I'll admit I was surprised when he joined me. He was initially so silent…' Suresh felt his blood run cold. 'But he was just shy. I soon had him talking away. Fascinating!' Miss Rawson prattled on, while Suresh felt his fingernails digging into his palm behind his back.

'Excuse me, madam,' he ventured. 'What was the old man's name?' Miss Rawson flapped a hand. 'I never thought to ask. He mentioned a granddaughter, though. I'm sure I'll find out more at breakfast.' She smiled happily. 'So much to see, you know. Who'd have thought a lady from the Cotswolds would become an explorer at my age?'

'Miss Rawson…' Suresh found his voice with difficulty. 'Would you like me to sit up with you until you sleep tonight?'

She gave him a look, and a funny laugh. 'Not at all! What a funny custom. I shall be quite fine, you know.'

Suresh wasn't surprised to learn that she died on the voyage home.

18

Spring 1848

The inheritance of the hotel surprised him and delighted his wife. She was all for selling up and retiring on the profits, or for immediately handing over the reins to the children. Suresh was quiet, but insistent. 'This is my life's work,' he assured her. And so

things continued much as before. There was a pestering legal query on the bequest by a distant cousin of Miss Rawson, but nothing of any great seriousness.

The letter's arrival surprised him. It was from the recently deceased Miss Rawson.

My dear Suresh,

Thank you again for your kindness. I am so pleased at the tare you've taken of my little investment.

This may seem like a strange request, but I know you're an accommodating host. You remember the dinner companion of my first night? Well, he asked that I pass his compliments on to you, and begged the small favour of this letter. Any eccentricity, as you well know, delights me. When I told him of my plans for the hotel after my death, he suggested that I enclose this letter to my lawyers, to pass on with the estate. It seemed a wonderful idea, allowing me to thank you for looking after things so well for me.

It also allows him the space to thank you for your patience with him over the years, and to pass on a quaint little trick he showed me. It involved a narrow wineglass, two forks and a cork. When we first spoke, he was a little indistinct, but once he'd suggested this parlour trick, I noticed that my hearing improved

remarkably.

At the bottom of the letter was a little diagram. Suresh copied it carefully into his notebook.

That evening, once the restaurant was quiet, Suresh sat down at a table and carefully embedded the forks in the cork and then balanced them over the wine glass. He spun them gently. There was a mournful singing noise from the glass, but little else. He looked around the restaurant, expectantly.

Nothing.

The kitchen door pushed open, and one of his children ran through with some plates.

'Father, what are you doing?' his son asked, laughing. Wafting through from somewhere was the smell of old pipe tobacco. Suresh

wrinkled his nose.

'I am going to bed,' Suresh replied, getting up from the table with difficulty.

Summer 1869

Suresh was supposed to be an old man now. He'd outlived his young wife, his brother and a child. And yet, he felt himself remarkably young.

The hotel continued well. There was spare money for a few innovations of plumbing. A new chef from the south had brought with him some recipes that found favour with the military men who liked

nothing more than ‘an old gasket blower’ of a curry. He’d found the tales of a ghost had spread gently among the staff and guests – but only in a way that people found thrilling. Especially as things had been so quiet for so long.

The mysterious young girl arrived one lunchtime. She still looked no older. He bowed and gave her a courteous welcome.

She seemed surprised, covering her mouth when she saw him. ‘Oh! You’re still here? You’ve been here a long time – I thought I wouldn’t need to make an effort to... Well, that there’d be someone new.’ She shrugged and giggled. ‘Can I have my usual table please?’

Suresh served her. ‘Would you be staying for a meal, or just a glass of lemonade, madam?’

Again the giggle. Suresh had already decided that this could get tiresome. ‘Oh, no!’ she said. It’s been a very long day – longer than you could imagine! I’d love whatever you recommend. And some lemonade.’ Suresh headed towards the kitchen, deciding to ask the chef to make everything as hot as possible.

When he brought the dishes out, he found her staring out to sea, sadly, tracing figures on the tablecloth.

‘Madam,’ he said, ‘forgive me for asking, but are you looking for your grandfather?’

The effect on her was astonishing. She gave him a different smile entirely. ‘Yes! Have you seen him?’

‘I don’t know, madam. Perhaps you could describe him for me?’

The girl pressed her hands together, puzzled, as though she’d never

thought about it before. ‘Well, I suppose he’s an old man… Looks quite forbidding, really… Long white hair, old black jacket. Very commanding voice.’

Suresh demurred. ‘I’m afraid, madam, I haven’t had the pleasure of conversing with him. But, yes, I have seen someone who looks like him.’

The girl was very eager. ‘Have you really? When?’

‘Eighteen-sixteen.’

The girl glanced down at her wristwatch and then back at Suresh. she said. ‘That’s not right. This is…’

Suresh dipped his head in gentle agreement. ‘Eighteen-sixty-nine, madam. But I have seen him on several occasions. And I rather believe that I first saw you –’

The girl clapped her hands around her ears. ‘No! No! Don’t tell me! Oh, Grandfather! What have we done?’

Suresh smiled. ‘If madam would care to enjoy her meal, perhaps I may be permitted to have a brief word afterwards?’

The girl nodded. She looked slightly guilty, and began to eat without a murmur. Suresh returned a few minutes later and handed her his notebook. She opened it without comment, turning the pages over quickly. She handed it back to him. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘And the food was lovely.’

She left rapidly, leaving behind enough rupees to build another hotel.

Winter 1870

The hotel was quiet now. There had been no guests all week. The weather was unseasonably wet, and the sea a churning, sandy grey. The beach looked dismal, with a few bedraggled goats weaving an uncertain path between the palm trees, bent almost double with the wind. The sun set quickly, as though keen to get the miserable day over with. Suresh sat at a table in the empty restaurant, listening to the wind banging away. He could feel a terrible draught whistling over his legs. It was cold, and he felt tired. He closed his eyes.

When he opened them, the old man was sat opposite him.

Suresh tried not to show his surprise, but sat up immediately.

Spreading his hands in a placating gesture, he shuffled to the bar, and returned with a wine glass, forks and a cork. He assembled them quickly and made to spin the forks, but the old man gestured with a spectral hand.

‘Ah,’ said Suresh. ‘Other way up?’

The old man nodded, impatiently.

Suresh began again. The glass began to hum, a note which moved gently up and down, at first like a song, and then like words and finally...

‘There we are at last,’ said the old man.

‘Hello,’ said Suresh, bowing.

‘Likewise,’ said the old man. ‘Now. When is it, please?’

‘December 1870.’

The old man looked gently around. ‘Are you sure? The weather’s

very... oh, never mind, I suppose you must be... well, you're always here, watching. A clever fellow like you would know the year.'

There was an awkward pause. Suresh didn't know quite what to say. He also heard distant shouts and footsteps, and hoped they wouldn't be interrupted.

The old man coughed. 'Any sign of Susan?'

'Your granddaughter? I haven't seen her for a year, sir. Sir...'

Suresh paused. 'How did you come to be haunting our restaurant?'

The old man ventured an encouraging smile, but the effect was decidedly wintry. 'I'm a ghost, eh? Well, I suppose you'd see it like that... I'm afraid my daughter and I are travellers. We don't just explore space, but we also venture out across time.'

The old man paused, and there was a comfortable silence between the two. If the old man had expected any surprise, he was disappointed. Suresh maintained his complacent expression – after all, he knew his hotel was so good that people had travelled from all over the Empire to eat there. Why wouldn't they also start to travel from the future some day, especially if the new chef continued to improve?

Suresh held the old man's gaze, and eventually he nodded, satisfied. 'We have a craft for this, which, between you and me, I have a somewhat imperfect understanding of. Oh, a serviceable knowledge, but...' A pause, and the smile widened. 'One can always do better.'

Suresh nodded, thinking of his dear mother's stubborn mule. From his pockets the man produced a thin little pipe, struck a match, and began to smoke. Suresh watched, enchanted as the smoke floated

around and through the old man.

‘And my granddaughter, she teases me about this. So, it was during

an attempt to fine-tune my operation of the craft that I... ah... came adrift, shall we say? Most embarrassing.’ He chuckled. ‘Poor Susan.

One instant I’m at the controls of the ship as we come in to land on this perfectly charming beach and the next, the ship has materialised, but I haven’t. Instead, I’ve found myself drifting through time. An

intriguing puzzle for her to solve but I always said she could do with some practice at piloting TARDIS. It should be a reasonably simple

matter for the silly girl to retrieve me, once she can deduce the origin point. I’m disappointed that it’s taking her so long, though – most

regrettable.’

The old man’s voice faded away into a whine. Suresh glanced over

and spun the forks again. The ghost smiled and looked up at him.

‘And I must thank you, dear boy. What a charming restaurant. I hope

I haven’t inconvenienced you too much.’

‘You’re welcome, sir,’ Suresh tried to keep sounding calm. ‘But

there is actually one... minor problem. You do seem to keep killing

my customers.’

‘No, no, no, no...’ The old man shook his head. ‘Try to see it

another way. Think of time as a stream, which I’m cast adrift in. I

latch on to the bigger rocks in the stream – those little bumps and

eddies caused when a life is coming to a close. It’s them who give

me... a temporary stability. I assure you I’ve not affected events in any way, dear sir.’

Suresh thought about that. It seemed to make sense. But then he

realised what the ghost's words meant.

'Oh, don't concern yourself,' said the old man, reading the look that Suresh couldn't hide. 'You're not about to die. I'm only here because one of those silly goats on the shore is about to try swimming. No, you've many, many years ahead of you yet. One of the advantages of working in such close proximity to a displaced time traveller is that it's slowed down your ageing process considerably. I could try to explain to you about chronon seepage, but, really, sir –' he waved a dismissive hand '– your expertise is in serving a quite wonderful mutton curry. Let's leave it at that, shall we?'

Suresh blinked.

From the beach came the sound of frantic bleating. The old man frowned. 'Oh, dear. Well, I must be going. I hope to see you again soon. I believe it's Suresh, isn't it?'

Suresh smiled. 'Yes, sir. It is very pleasant to be meeting you at last.'

'Likewise, I'm sure. I'm the Doctor.'

'Well, then, goodbye, Doctor,' said Suresh.

The table was empty.

Spring 1890

The table was empty. The hotel was closed.

Suresh realised it was pretty much the only way. His lack of ageing was beginning to be an embarrassment. To have outlived his wife and sons, that was one thing. To have outlived a grandchild... that was even more painful. And it had also made him the subject of some

disagreeable talk. So, instead, he announced the closing of the hotel, appointed his least foolish grandchild as caretaker, and gave to his remaining family sums of money to invest in hotels of their own. All too eagerly they took the money and headed off for Bombay.

Suresh himself was packing up and going on a little journey. The

hotel would still be here when he got back.

As he took a last look around the restaurant, the girl came in. ‘Lady Susan!’ he said, bowing.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Hello.’

‘I’m afraid you’ve just missed your grandfather. The Doctor sends

his compliments.’

Summer 1924

The restaurant was busy. The new owners, a retired military couple,

couldn’t believe their luck. They’d brought the hotel for a bargain, provided they found a place on the staff for the old owner. Or rather, it appeared, the son of the old owner. But he’d proved ‘quite the

treasure’, as Mrs Colonel Jefferson told everyone.

Suresh was content. He was back where he belonged, managing his

beloved restaurant. A few old customers claimed to ‘see old Suresh in him quite distinctly’, but that didn’t matter. They were just passing through – none of the locals thought of him as anything other than a relation of the man who’d once inherited the hotel from old Mr

Rawson.

He had everything he wanted, really. He’d travelled widely,

married again, started a whole new family, and enjoyed even more

money from the sale of the hotel. He worried a little that the

Jeffersons didn’t quite know enough to run a hotel, but he quietly

stopped the villagers from stealing too openly from them.

The English had changed little over the years, he found. Perhaps

they were a little nicer, perhaps not. Even the best of them treated him with polite condescension.

One day a young businessman stopped him as he was passing the

table. He and his friends had sat down for a hard evening of drinking and card playing. ‘I say,’ barked the man, ‘my friend Suresh here can tell you all about the ghost. You know – they say that the devil plays cards here.’

Suresh bowed. He had many things to do, and he really wasn’t

happy with the fish of the day. But, he figured, there was always time enough. ‘Well, sirs, it was on a night, very much like tonight, that the ghost was seen, over a hundred years ago. He appeared to some

gentleman just like yourselves, sat at this very table. There were three of them to play cards. In those days that was unlucky, and so they

dealt a devil’s hand. Should they have been surprised that a ghost

joined them at their game, and that, within days, one of them was

dead?’

The story went down well. The men laughed, the ladies looked

concerned, many little jokes were made. Suresh moved quietly on,

stopping only to bow to an old man and his granddaughter as they

came in.

‘I’m afraid your usual table is taken, Doctor,’ he said.

All of Beyond

Helen Raynor

An Adventure of Toria,

with the Second Doctor and Jamie McCrimmon

I says this story over and over for you to remember, and you must learn it in the hart, keeping it wher you cant drop it and lose it, as you mite a rich coyn from yore hand. So first thing up is this story is TRU. It is the beginning of us all here. How we are here and not you knows when So listen and learn this in yore hart. So when I am died you can say it over and over yoreself. The all of it and forever. Remember.

I had a frend, back in the tyme of befor, in you knows when I had plenty fiends, but Lissa was the most lyke to me. This was when I was forteen yers, Lissa the same. We were in the herding offis, watching the pigs and then the sheeps to at lamm tyme – whats an offis? – wry group of workers called an offis. Dont kno why. Was just the word.

Herding offis was most boys. Me and Lissa wer girls but strong and fast, for chasing the babypigs, and had small girl hands for to help the sheeps birth the lamms. We wer lyke boys to nil we began changing to look more lyke eves, and the boys changing to look more lyke adams. Then everything chaynges.

Lissa began to go with the boys at nite. I didnt go, not then, for I knew that after going with the boys comes growing round with a babychild, and after a babychild, they is no more running with the herding offis. And I didnt see it was fair, that boys carry on running just becos they dont carry the babychild. So I pretend I dont see the boys look lyke adams, and me an eve. Carry on, saym as.

And Lissa grew round. And she was less my frend then. And I didnt kno what I wanted. Becos a babychild was always good and needed, but I wanted my frend and for us to keep running tyke

befor.

But life must chaynge.

Lissa had a babychild. A girl. It took for days, and she screamed lowd. Babychild didnt scream tho. It dyde. Lissa was silent sad, and 25

I sat not knowing the best to say, so being silent to. Becos secret in my hart, I was glad the babychild dyde. It shames me much to say out lowd, but it is tru, and part of this story, so must be told. I thoght, and yes I say stupid and bad befor you do, that Lissa woud come back running with me and be a frend lyke befor. But of cones she wood not. I was young then.

My punishment was Lissa got sick. Shivering hot and hurting in her body withowt a wound. My hart in my body turned sick to, becos I knew it was my bad thinking had made her sick. She lay sick for days and I lay with her – and then the oldest adam and eve said she most go to the dying hut, and I could not go with her. I said she was not dying but they pushed me back. After the evryday rain had fallen, they carried her to the hut. I ran fast away.

I ran to the wyld woods at the Edge. Myles and myles away. I hid for two days lyke a smallchild waiting to be found in a hiding game, but I did not want to be found. And no one came for me. We didnt go the Edge becos we knowed it was bad, and befor you ask I dont kno why. It was just not a playce to go. Beyond a greyt ditch was a vasty grey wall, not seethru lyk a window but misty lyk a clowd. It reached up as far as yore eyes coud see and then more.

I didnt care then that it was a bad playce to be. I was wyld in my head and sad in my hart. I sheltered evry day from the evryday rain

under a wide tree. I thoght of Lissa, befor and now. I was hungry

but not hungry.

Then on the third day I lay down to sleep. So tyred I was then

with the over and over in my head, and on the leafs and earth I fell sleeping.

It was dawnlite when I woke. Not gentlelyke, but sudden. Ther

was a wyld wind in my face, and a lite tyke the daylite on and off,

brite, and a sound tyke nothing I had herd befor. Lyke the grind of a knyf sharp on a block, and the rumble in a sheep belly, all mixed in, only as lowd as the shout of all the adam and eves together.

WOWF. Fear lyke a bad dream waking. Only not a dream, becos

they in the trees after the lite and sound died was a box. Tall lyke a hut. Not rownd but sgwar. And blu. Blu tyke the sky befor a storm –

sept that was not what I thoght then, not knowing the sky owtside,

nor its color.

I thoght in the silence to run, but I was long away from the

huthub, and anyways, even with the fear I wanted to see what was.

So I hid in the trees, wayting.

Out of the box opened a door. And out of the door came a man. A

man older than I had seen befor. My bite, but dark hair, and dressed in a pelt, same as us then, but not the same to becos I didnt kno the animal he wore. He had blu eyes. Strong blu.

And he stepped owt and sniffed, and lookt rowed with his blu

eyes. And then he says –

Well, this certainly isn't what I was expecting. Jamie!

Out of the box came another man, not so old – and I closed my

lips to keep a laugh in, becos he wore a SKIRT, lyke an eve.

What's the matter, Doctor? It's just a forest.

Coordinates must have been wrong, says the first man. *This is supposed to be a fabulous city of soaring spires, not a – not a –*

He stopt, frowning, gazing right up abov. I glance quick to see what he looks at. Nothing – just the clowd wisps and the high high roof.

Not a greenhouse, sayd he.

It can't be, says the skirt man. *Those are clouds up there. I can feel a breeze.*

That's became it's a giant greenhouse, Jamie. Big enough to have its own ecosystem.

But whatever for?

I've no idea. Perhaps we should ask.

And then he lookt strayt at me. Lyk he'd knowed I was there all along, hid in the leafs.

Well, young lady? Can you throw a little light on the subject?

He held owt his hand at me, fixing me with his eyes. His blu eyes.

I turned and RAN, fast away, thru the trees lyk a hunted rabbit, my hart beating fast and my breth burning my throwt. How had he seen me, so well hid? And who were they?

I ran away from the Edge, at least a myle befor I stop, sure they were not behind me. I stood no breth and shakey. It was tyme for the evryday rain, and I stood letting it wash me while I lookt at my thoghts.

It had been seven genrations since the first adam and eves. In all that tyme no one had come from elswher. Thats how we knowed we was the last left. And the man in the peltcoat was older than I had seen befor, ever. Most adams die about after forty yers, eves sooner cos of growing rownd with the babychilds.

Something stopt me from walking on to the huthub. I mite not be thoght tru in what I told them. And if they wer hunters – hunters of US – I mite lead them to us all. And truth was – I wanted to see the to men agen. The old one hadnt lookt at me lyke a hunter. More lyke he knowed me. I had felt so lonly sins Lissa got sick. And – Doctor. The other man had called him doctor. Tho they spowk so strange, I knowed a doctor was the adam or eve who lookt after the sick. And I thoght maybe somhow, with him being so old, maybe he knowed more than the doctors who had sayd for Lissa to go to the

dying hut. Maybe he could mayk her well. If she was stil alyve.

So I went back.

I was careful this tyme. I crept so silent not even a piglit could hear, and they are flitey. The to men wer arguing as the old one built a fyre.

Doctor, if we are in a greenhouse, you've no business making afire.

In a greenhouse this size, we could build an absolute inferno to very little effect –give me a hand, will you?

They wer not good at making a fyre. Ther was much sparks and smowk, and showting, but litl fyre. I thoght – thats one thing I kno better to do.

After a litl flaym was got going, they sat rownd and the doctor

got a big fork, and platter, and a string of pig sosij from the blu box.

Here, you grill the sausages, he sayd to the skirt man, giving him the fork.

We know there are people here – will they not see the smoke?

Skirt man spyked the sosijes with the fork and held them to the fyre.

Oh, probably. Let the mountain come to Mohammed, Jamie! And he got owt of his peltcoat pocket a thin wand with holes in it. He put it to his lips and I started, becos ther came the strayngest sound. Lyk half a humansong, and half a birdsong. No words, just shrilling and

trilling. The sownd danced along lyke leafs on the trees and the

sosijes cooked on the open fyre, and after som tyme I caym out

from my hidden playce, and stood across the fyre from them.

Skirt man lookt at the doctor. He put the wand down on the

grownd, and the silens was straynge.

Sausages! he sayd. *You look half famished. Here, Jamie –*

sausage sandwiches all round. And from som pocket of his peltcoat the doctor wayved a big bake of bread.

I had et nothing for three days and my belly was growling. It

must hav been in my eyes, lyke the dog who watches you eat a chop

down to bone, wayting for the scraps.

I'm the Doctor – this is Jamie. You don't have to tell me who you are, but I find it helps.

Toria, I sayd. My naym is Toria.

The skirt man and the doctor lookt each at the other, and the

doctor laughed short like a bark.

Well, now. We've got a friend called Victoria. Very resourceful

young lady – I'm sure we'll get along famously. Yes. The doctor coffed a litl in his throwt. Then spoke lowder. *So tell me, Toria, do you live here?* He swept his arm rownd, big shayp, meaning the all of this.

Cors. Wher els wood I live?

28

What kind of an accent is that? sayd the skirt man, handing the doctor a sosij sandwich.

That's probably what she's thinking about you. The doctor held out to me the bread and sosij. I took it.

No. I was thinking why he was wearing a skirt, I says byting the

bread. The doctor laughed lowd, lyk at a greyt joke.

Kilt, sayd Jamie. *It's a kilt, not a skirt*.

You kilt it? Sayd i, for it didnt look lyk a pelt. How?

The doctor laughed more and Lowder. I began to laugh to, not

knowing why, but it felt lyk I had not laughed for long tyme. I kept laughing after the doctor stopt, for a whyl, and then when I stopt,

my fayce was wet with crying, and the to men wer silent.

My frend is sick, I sayd. Yore a doctor. Wil you com and see her?

He was silent for a litl tyme. Then he sayd –

I might not be the sort of doctor your friend needs, Toria. But if you want me to come, I'll come.

I nodded yes.

Let's finish these first, shall we? (He ment the sosijes and bread.) *And you can tell me all about your frend*.

So I did. All the everything I told you befor – abowt the herding

offis, abowt Lissa's babychild. Sometymes the doctor asked me

things but most he just lisnd.

When I had ended telling, he sat for a whyle most still. Then he

mayde a small ripple of song come from the wand, and lept up to

his feet.

Time to go! Lead on, MacDuff, he sayd, poynting at me.

Is near half a days walk, sayd I.

Good job we're marching on a full stomach, sayd Jamie. And he handed me the last sosij. I lyked him more now.

I led the way, along the animal tracks, cross the stream and thro

the trees, half lisning as the doctor and Jamie walked after me.

Doctor, is this wise? We've no idea who these people are.

That's exactly what I'd like to find out. This is Earth, in the year 54,010. And, yes, I'm sure the TARDIS is right this time, before you ask.

So?

So, Jamie, we should be right in the heart of one of the most

successful and technologically advanced periods of Earth's whole history. Good grief!

It was the rain. Starts sudden and lots, not lyk the rain you kno. I ran under a big tree, leafs lyk the rooves of a hut, for to shelter, the to men following.

What a downpour, sayd Jamie.

Is just the evryday rain, sayd I, not knowing why it was straynge

to him.

The what rain?

Evryday. Rain comes evryday, sametyme.

Really? How? sayd Jamie. I stared at him.

Becos it does.

It's typical of a biome this size, sayd the doctor. *That's 'big greenhouse' to*

you. Like an equatorial rainforest, albeit a

temperate one.

Glad we've cleared that up, then, sayd Jamie.

I told you. It's a giant, finely balanced ecosystem. I bet there's no seasons here. It must be the same all year round. That right, Toria?

No winter, summer, spring?

I shrug, the words all la la la to me then. Rain stopt now, sayd I,

and net of walking agen, the doctor and Jamie behind. Ther was

som talk of rain, and somewher named the high-lands, and how

Jamie shoud be used to it all. Then the doctor axed me, did I kno

what Earth was?

I scooped a hand of earth up, showed it him.

Quite right, quite right... Does it mean anything else to you? Do you know what this world is called?

World? sayd I, not knowing the naym.

What do you call all of this? sayd he, wayving his arms rownd.

I didnt kno what he ment. I told him words for diffrent things, lyk

the Edge, the huthub, the sheep feelds, all the tyme walking, but he wanted me to give him a big word for everything. And I didnt hav

one.

You see, Jamie? Something's wrong. This is supposed to be a

golden age, a time of prosperity, peace – glorious invention and technological innovation. Instead, unless this child is lying and I don't believe she is –

We stopt at the top of a steal hil, looking down over the huthub.

Three days I had been away, and it lookt straynge to me. The rownd

huts, the smowk from cooking fyres owt of the rushrooves.

Instead, we seem to be in the equivalent of the Stone Age. Only in a greenhouse, sayd the doctor, staring.

We walked down the hill towards the huts, Jamie saying he hoped they wer frendly.

We walked past the owter huts, folk wer slow to see at first, then running owt to look, stopping the cooking and maykin work.

Hello there! sayd the doctor, happylyke. None answered, som running ahed to tell the elders. Sure enuf, then som adams caym towards us, eyes wyde and mowths all agawp, talking all the saymtyme, som flees, som laughing. Som with spears poynting. I held up my hand to shush them. Who are they? shams Jayk at me.

30

Jayk was an elder adam. The others lookt at him for what to do.

Doctor and the Jamie, says I, a bit wrong, but I was all spun with the noys and showting.

Wher are they from? Whet have you been? This was Roja, not lots years older than me, always chopsing.

Mynd your nose, snaps I. Anyways, they wants to kno who we are. And hes come to help Lissa.

Lissa dyed, sayd Roja. Jayk whopped him on the back of the head.

To days gone, sayd Jayk.

We're too late, sayd Jamie.

I'm sorry, Toria, sayd the doctor.

My fayce was all stiff and not lyke my own.

The doctor reached a hand owt towards me. Boys lifted spears up to stop him still. He sighed.

Might I make a suggestion? Why don't I have a chat with your leader, or whatever it is you have here. Hmm?

Im an elder, says Jayk. A bit rudelyke.

Are you really? sayd the doctor, frowning. I could see why. Jayk was thirty for. Which was old. The doctor lookt lots older.

Com with me. Jayk wayved him forward, and the three of us walked to the elderhut. Eves and childers coming owt to stare as we past.

The elderhut was in the hart of the huthub, the oldest tho not the biggest hut. Elders didnt live ther, they came ther for govvermunt. This was mayking the rules and sorting the squabbles that happened. Elders wer any adam or eve over thirty years, which was old and wyse enuf to tell others what to do.

Jayk pusht away the bark door to let the doctor and Jamie into the hut, and 1 sneaked in fastlyke behind them befor he coud say no. My head was full of Lissa but I wanted to kno what the doctor was to say.

The doctor lookt rownd the hut. Was dark and smoky lyk all huts, the Eyre in the midl hiss and spit. I showed them to sit down backs to the but wall and we wayted as the adam and eves arrived. I told the doctor in wispers what I told you – govvermunt and who elders were.

Why do you call yourself Adam and Eves? wisperd the doctor.

Adam and eve wer the first boy and girl to have a babychild, sayd I (wondrin how he coud not kno). Seven generations ago, sayd I.

The doctor lookt at me sharp, and lyke he wanted me to say mor, but by then all of the elders wer in the hut, crowded and staring.

We begin, sayd Lynsa, the most old of elders. Was over forty, which for an eve was rare. She lookd the most old, with no teeth

and her back bent. She axed the doctor who was he, and why was he here. He told her he caym in a tardis (I nod lots to show I seen the blu box, and its tru, but I stop when Jayk gives me a fiers look). He told her he wasnt sure wher this was exactly. That he didnt kno this playce was here – and that if they wer happy, he would lyk to ask the elders a litl abowt themselfs.

Well, ask an elder abowt themselfs, thats the day gon.

Lynsa told all about histry. Abowt how they was onse a rayce of giant elders, who fort each other in a greyt war. Abowt how the war got close to killing evryone, and poysoned the rivers and trees and animals.

Jayk took up the telling when Lynsa got weary, and told the histry of how some childers of the giant elders wer took here. Littl childers, seven, eyt year old. Most dyed, but the stronger grew and then the first boy and girl mayd a babychild. These wer the first adam and eve.

Then caym other babychildren, and when they got old to adam and eve age, they had babychildren to. And so to now – the seventh generation. Each adam and eve telling what they knowed to the next

generation. How to keep and hunt the sheep and pigs. How to mayk fyre and build huts. How to clean a cut with water and spit, and keep the sick to dying away from the well folk.

The doctor axed questions. And the saym as me, the elders didnt kno a lot of words he axed abowt. How old was everyone? How many of the babychildren lived after birthing? Did we kno what was antybyotics. Where was everyone els?

Ther is no anyone els. Just us, sayd Lynsa.

Then who lives outside? sayd the doctor.

Owtside?

Beyond 'the edge'.

Beyond is the ruined earth, sayd Jayk. Wher nothing livs.

And the doctor lookt very sad. Which was fair enuf. But he shook his head, and sayd, *No, Jayk. The Earth is not ruined.*

In the silence, I knowed evryone thoght – how does he kno?

Seven generations and no one come. But no one sayd a thing.

You see, he sayd. *There hasn't been a war for hundreds and hundreds of years. Not a bad one. Nothing on the scale you*

imagine. Of course, four centuries ago, there was the Great Melt, and things got pretty bad for a while. Unless you were a fish. But then – well, there's this remarkable thing called terraforming,

although we don't need to go into that now. The world was made

habitable again, and civilisation rebuilt itself, on the foundations of peace and progress, and harmony with nature. The giant elders –

who really aren't giant, you know – are all out there. Right now. In 32

beautiful clean cities and on lush plains. Living wonderful lives –

most of them live to be a hundred or so, quite comfortably.

It was Jamie who stopt him. Just lifted his hand to shush him.

Becos we all sat with our thoghts running and still at the saym tyme, not knowing what we shoud say or think. I lookt rown the but and knowed my fayce was the saym as the others – all stiff and stupidlyke.

And I was angry at the doctor for mayking us stupid, when he was stupid, with his long no-meaning words of terrathing and sivlishun.

This is not tru, sayd Jayk. You are telling a dream as a child mite have and saying it is real. You lie.

Why would I lie? sayd the doctor.

Ther is nothing els but here, sayd Lynsa.

No, Lynsa. There's a whole world out there. A whole... Where people don't die at forty, worn out and ill.

You lie, sayd Jayk. If ther was folk left, they woud have come for us. Here is the only playce.

The doctor stood then, his fayce angrylyke and looking rownd at us with his blu eyes.

I don't know why they haven't come for you. But I do know they've kept you here with fairy tales and fear. And you've suffered as a result. Toria –

And I jumpt as he lookt at me.

Outside, your friend Lissa would have been in a hospital. With basic medicines to help her get well, medicines you've never seen here.

I didnt kno what to think.

All of you, all this time – have you never tried to go beyond 'the edge'?

Cors, sayd Jayk. One every generation or so. The Edge frys you

lyke a fish on a stick, only fssst! Fast lyk that.

The doctor nodded. *I see. Basic electric shock. Like a fence to*

keep cattle from wandering. Exactly like it, in fact. There's a

natural human impulse to see a horizon and want to know what lies beyond it, and they've made damn sure you're too scared to try.

Well, that's easily got round. Come with me, now. And he walked fast to the doorway.

Why? sayd I.

Because I can get past this 'edge'. Show you the way out.

No. Why are we here? sayd I. It seemed a very stupidlyke thing

to say but also the biggest thing could ever be axed. And all the

elders looks at me, lyke when a child spekes and shows they kno

more words than you thoght. But they was scared, to. I lookt at the

doctor.

Ah, sayd the doctor. *That I don't know*. He lookt at the grownd.

If there had really been a war, it's possible you might have been Left here as... some sort of insurance against future disaster – to restock a decimated population. Although your survival in here

would hardly be certain. And, anyway, there was no war.

I spoke again.

The first adam and eve were childers, to start with. All was

childers. The doctor stared at me, all still, his blu eyes lyke a fyre. I wayted for him to speke, but he did not.

All was left as childers. No elders. No one for to show small ones

what they knowed. Why would folks do that?

Yes, sayd the doctor, shushed. *They left a group of children to look after themselves. No adults with you – I bet that's why you remember them as giants. Oh, Toria.* He shayked his head. *At various points in its long and very varied history, the human race questions where it's going – what it might become. And, sometimes, they worry that they've come too far from whatever they were*

before. Every highly evolved industrial society, on every planet, throughout history, creates a group who reject that technology.

Who choose to live a life outside the cities, close to the earth. They might be religious, political – maybe they're just following a dream of ancestors. Looking for an Eden. I don't know. But they think it'll bring them closer to what it means to be human.

He lookt rownd at us, and he seemed very old as he did so.

I think this place – all of you – are an experiment. A terrible and cruel experiment.

I didnt kno the word speriment. But I knowed terrible and crule.

(And I remember this, when I think sometymes how we live now

and how they let at walk among them. Is not ther permission we

shoud be asking. They shoud be asking owes.)

Would not be the first adam and eve who built this playce, sayd I.

Would not be the first childers who chose to com here.

No, it wouldn't. They were brought here, and left here, sayd the doctor. *To see how they lived. To see if you survived*.

I could not move this thoght in my head. It sat lyke a big stone in

my mowth, that I could not speke rownd.

I'm sorry, sayd the doctor. Jamie sayd somthing to shushed for me to hear. And we al sat fora tyme saying nothing. Then the doctor

spoke agen.

I know a way of breaking through the 'edge'. It's not easy – but with the right technology, it can be done. I can do it, sayd the doctor.

Even after al he sayd thee was a wowf of no from lots of elders,

and a debayt that went on for a whyle. I sat silent whyle they rowed. I knowed my thoghts.

Nite caym, and in the end we wee divyded. Som caym with me and Jamie and the doctor. Som stayed back. Befor we walked thro the woods towards the Edge, we went to owe huts and took the small things we had that wee owns. Lyk we knowed whatever happend we wood not be back. Most took spears, and pelts. Youve seen them in the archyve. I took this. See? A small dolly mayd for me by the eve who birthed me. Tis only bark and pelt, but this here – the hair from her head. She dyed befor I was ten.

We walked thro the woods in the darknite, holding tyre torches to see by. The doctor ahead, mayking the straynge songs on the wand. Jamie helpt the small ones carry ther things.

I knowed why som had stayed in the huthub. Part becos they wer feared of what mite happen if we tryed to break thin the Edge. Part becos they did not want to kno. Thinking even a bad thing, which is knowed, is better somhow than a maybe good thing which is not knowed.

(In the end they al caym owt. When yore world chaynges, you cant pretend it hasnt. You cant put things back to how they wer nor unlearn things.)

At the blu box we sat down, tyred with the walking, all shushed and staring at the Edge. Was a straynge thing to see upclose. I wonder now how I coud ever have thoght it part of that playce. It was not made of wood or stone or animal. It was – tecol. Tecnolgy. Dont laugh. You knows what I mean.

Whyle we sat the doctor ran in and owt of the blu box with handfuls and armfuls of straynge things, sometyme happy, sometyme cross, always lyvely and talking. He builded them al together, lyke weaving. Sure ther can be no more to corn owt of that smal spayce, I thoght, as the doctor ran insyde agayn.

What is insyde? sayd Ito Jamie.

I think you've had enough surmises for one day, lassie, sayd he.

It's just his hut. That's all.

Soon enuf the doctor had a thing lyk a spear pointed at the Edge, all rootlyk things trayling out of it into the straynge thing he had weaved.

Power her up, Jamie! Red lever on the console, he sayd, and Jamie ran into the blu box. A thin whyne lyk a hungry dog caym from the spear.

Now, this is perfectly safe, sayd the doctor. *Well, as good as.*

Might be a bit loud, though. Probably will be, infact, now I think of it, so you'll be best off putting your hands over –

WHUMPFLASH! Head over heels I went backward, brite lite

blinding me, ears whyning lowd. Lots screamed arownd me, and I did to. Then I lookt up, shayking my head and spitting earth from

my mowth.

Good lord, sayd the doctor. He was lying on the grownd behind the spear, surprised, fayce covered in sootsmut. *Well, that was jolly powerful...*

Jamie caym owt of the blu box, and we helpt the doctor to his feet, all the whyle staring at the Edge.

Or what was left of it.

Lyk a big big window ther was a hole in the Edge. As big as fyve huts on top of evry other. And you must remember, this wasnt lyke seeing a hole in a wall or roof for us – it was lyke the sky itself ripping open. Impossibl, you say. The sky is the sky and nothing beyond. Wel. That is what we all thoght abowt you knows wher.

My guts turned over insyde me, and the strayngest thing was that I thoght to run fast away, in fear. And befor I knowed it, I was running, but forwards, not away. Running for to get to the rip in the Edge, running lyk my lyf was the pryze.

Even befor the doctor sayd, *Come on!* , I was running. I slidscrambled down into the ditch, ripping thro grass and bushes, scratches on my arms and legs. The doctor close behind me, then Jamie, then Jayk and som of the childers, then evryone, pushing and rushing down, thro and up the far syde of the ditch –

All staring owt, gasping breth. Holding the smal thyngs we took with us. I stood beside the doctor.

You see? The world outside. The world you're supposed to be in.

That you've every right to be in.

Ther was a wind in my fayce. Colder than I had felt befor.

You won't have words for it, Toria. But they'll come.

I lookt out at the

At the

WORLD.

The greyt sky withowt end.

The woods and playns that reached out beyond even wher my

eyes could see.

You see on the horizon? sayd the doctor.

HORIZON. In the faroff, a vasty huthub.

CITY.

It's yours, sayd the doctor. *If you want it.*

And that was the beginning of us all here.

One by one we walked out, over what was left of the Edge. Still

carrying the small things we had that wer ours. The adam and eves.

The childers. Staring at the horizon, we kept walking.

Owt into the all of beyond.

The Eyes Have It

Colin Harvey

An Adventure of Lionel Tooley,

with the Sixth Doctor and Melanie Bush

'Exterminate?' said the old woman plaintively. 'Exterminate *what*?'

Lionel Tooley expelled a sigh from his nostrils in order that he

might maintain his fixed grin. While it was true that in the two long decades he'd been doing this job he'd been asked all manner of

stupid questions, this particular enquiry pretty much took the proverbial biscuit.

He inclined his gaze pointedly towards the modified gas mask hanging limply around his neck, and shifted the hefty canister of insecticide slung over his shoulder. As a poignant final touch he straightened himself up to his full five foot ten in order that the legend ‘Bug-B-Gone’, which was emblazoned with no subtlety whatsoever on his beige overalls, be rendered fully and unambiguously visible.

Before he could deliver a suitably caustic retort, however, Lionel looked properly at the hunched elderly woman for the first time, and noticed that she happened to be wearing dark glasses. It occurred to Lionel that wearing sunglasses indoors in the middle of a bleak November day was either wilfully eccentric or more possibly a telltale indicator of blindness. The realisation that the latter explanation was the more plausible made him colour, not through embarrassment, but through irritation.

‘Bugs, madam,’ said Lionel, trying unconvincingly to invest his world-weary voice with suitable gravitas. ‘We’ve had a complaint. In fact, we’ve had many complaints.’

‘Oh, really?’ asked the woman good-naturedly, tilting her head with an intrigued air. She smiled disconcertingly. ‘Bugs, you say?’

‘People have complained about the noises, madam,’ Lionel continued. ‘Scuttling noises. Weird sucking noises.’ He sniffed. ‘And, uh, other stuff ‘ At this, he flashed a glance at the gigantic gelatinous goo strung between the upper reaches of the house and a

collection of disorderly dustbins.

37

‘Oh, dear,’ said the woman. ‘I dare say the Council sent you. Well, come in, come in.’

She ushered Lionel in and closed the heavy mahogany door behind her, fastening manifold locks and bolts as she did so. The gloomy hallway was bedecked with trophies and trinkets evidently acquired from a lifetime of global travel. A moose’s head gazed down mournfully from above the door.

‘This way, this way,’ said the elderly woman, gesturing emphatically. She began to make her way down the hallway, groping past an enormous beechwood cabinet. As he followed, Lionel was discomforted to see that the cabinet contained row upon row of ornamental China dolls, clad in frilly dresses and frock coats. Their chubby porcelain faces stared at him wide-eyed, almost reproachfully, and in that moment Lionel remembered the doll that had dominated his childhood.

When he was a kid, everyone presumed that Lionel would take over the family business from his dad. Lionel’s dad, like Lionel’s dad’s dad before him, had been a stage ventriloquist. In fact, Lionel’s dad, like Lionel’s dad’s dad before him, had been a very successful stage ventriloquist, touring the British coast for summer season after summer season to rapturous full houses.

The ability to endow an inanimate dummy with life, or to throw one’s voice, or simply to get up on stage and make people laugh,

had been skills seemingly innate to several generations of male Tooleys. Except Lionel. For some reason the precise admixture of genes enabling a man to sit a foot-high wooden mannequin on his knee and make it convincingly recite risqué poetry whilst imbibing a Scotch on the rocks had been lost before it reached Lionel.

His father and grandfather had spent many long hours wishing it was not so. They would sit Lionel on a makeshift stage in his grandfather's draughty outhouse, Miss Jemima Submersible perched gamely on his lap.

Miss Jemima had been in the family several generations, having been wrought from cedar by one of Lionel's Victorian ancestors. Jemima wore a lovingly maintained frilly dress and clutched a bouquet of flowers to her bosom. Lionel was tasked with conversing with the sweet-looking puppet as though it were made of flesh and blood, shifting its creaky varnished head in a manner that conveyed some semblance of life and vitality.

The act consisted of a series of faintly risqué set-ups that Lionel was required to launch at Miss Jemima. The puppet was then expected to respond with a series of hilarious put-downs in a voice that was simultaneously innocent and ribald and which, crucially, would appear to emanate from the mannequin's bulbous lips rather

than Lionel's quivering mouth. The act would culminate with Lionel becoming so incensed with Miss Jemima that he would fling her into a nearby chest, march to the other side of the stage and

begin to sob in mock dejection.

At which point Miss Jemima would start to sing the music hall classic *The Girl with the Gooseberry Peepers* by way of apology, her voice magically emanating from the chest. Upon being released from the box Miss Jemima would go to kiss Lionel, only for a stream of water to erupt hilariously from her bouquet of flowers into his face.

Invariably, the act would prove to be a disaster. The only laughs Lionel could elicit from his audience were those born of derision: an oft-repeated judgement from his father and grandfather would suggest that Lionel's performance was altogether more wooden than that of Miss Jemima Submersible. If you looked close enough, they would scoff, you could actually see his lips moving. At the conclusion of the act Lionel would be left alone to consider his actual dejection and the inevitable palm-full of splinters.

After years of humiliation, Lionel's father and grandfather wearily and reluctantly concluded that the ventriloquist line had reached its end. Miss Jemima was converted into a frankly disturbing coffee table and Lionel, the proverbial bad seed, was encouraged into a career in insect control.

And so Lionel found himself now, slouching along yet another hallway on his way to yet another confrontation with creepy-crawly destiny. As he returned from his reverie he became vaguely aware that the elderly woman had evidently been providing a commentary on the trip down the hallway, and felt the urge to grunt in response,

purely out of politeness.

‘They arrived shortly before you did,’ she was explaining, as they rounded the corner and emerged into an unexpectedly vast lounge. The room, like the rest of the house, contained the bric-a-brac of a lifetime’s journeying. Numerous works of art, including oil paintings and lithographs, hung from every available space on the oak-panelled walls. The ceiling was adorned with a series of slowly rotating brass fans of varying scale, and assorted scarlet and green drapes gently swayed in front of the tall windows. An Egyptian sarcophagus stood in line aside an immense suit of samurai armour. The centrepiece was a gigantic stuffed polar bear, which reared up behind a baroque chaise longue.

As Lionel’s gaze scanned the room for something recognisably ordinary to reassure himself that he hadn’t simply walked into the lair of a mad woman, his eyes came to rest on probably the least ordinary aspect of the room. Two people, one a curly haired man in

a clown outfit and the other a shortish, auburn-haired young woman sporting a blue-and-white floral dress, were huddled around a small flashing black box held aloft by the man. The pair stood stock still, evidently waiting for the box to do something. In fact, if the woman hadn’t pointed at the device Lionel might have presumed the colourful duo was stuffed, just like the gigantic polar bear behind them.

‘This is the Doctor,’ said the old woman, bustling up behind Lionel. ‘And his assistant, Miss Bush.’

The man in the clown outfit started and, in suitably pantomime fashion, he and his 'assistant' attempted to conceal the device behind their backs. Lionel regarded the couple with deep suspicion.

'Pleased to meet you,' said the Doctor decisively and with a big grin, lurching forwards and stretching out a friendly hand by way of greeting. Lionel shook hands reluctantly, altogether glad of his industrial-strength glove.

'You must be from the Council too,' said the Doctor, exchanging a knowing glance with his companion. 'Funny business, don't you think? These, uh, noises and the goo outside. Most peculiar.'

'You see all sorts in this job,' said Lionel slowly, his eyes flitting between the man and the woman.

The woman rasped something and smiled meaningfully at Lionel.

'She says "I bet you do",' explained the Doctor. 'Mel has a touch of laryngitis – she's been overdoing it a bit of late.' Mel and the Doctor exchanged a further meaningful glance. 'And the TARDIS translator doesn't quite stretch to amplification, I'm afraid.' He smiled again, evidently pleased about something.

'We were about to go upstairs and investigate,' interrupted the elderly lady.

'By all means,' said the Doctor. 'After you.'

The door to the attic was locked. The Doctor, Mel and Lionel clustered at the top of the wooden staircase, hunched because of the low ceiling, waiting for the elderly lady to find the appropriate set of keys from a bunch dangling from her neck.

Mel, evidently trying to make conversation, rasped something

and pointed at the huge canister slung around Lionel's shoulder.

Before the Doctor could translate, Lionel responded. 'Insecticide. Premium-strength insecticide.'

At that, a very loud scraping noise emanated from inside the attic, as though something very heavy was dragging itself across the wooden floor.

'Sounds like we might need it,' said the Doctor, raising a querulous eyebrow.

40

'After you,' said the elderly woman, gesturing towards the door. It creaked open, revealing only absolute darkness.

'Thank you,' said the Doctor, and resolutely headed through the door. Mel paused briefly to flash a reassuring smile at Lionel, before following the Doctor into the gloom.

It transpired that the attic was not completely dark. A cracked window high up in the eaves afforded a section of light that fell across the centre of the wooden floor, in which myriad particles of dust whirled haphazardly, the only movement in the otherwise immobile darkness. Lionel saw a series of yellow and green lights emanating in the shadow in front of him, and realised that the Doctor must have reactivated the device Lionel had seen him with earlier.

'Well, that confirms it,' said the Doctor, half to himself. 'Looks like we've found the source of the signal.'

‘The signal?’ ventured Lionel, confused. He took a step forward to where the Doctor was standing, and suddenly felt a disturbing wetness against his cheek. A huge length of slime suspended between a rafter and the floor quivered violently as he stepped back into the half-light. Lionel wiped his face in disgust.

‘A distress signal,’ continued the Doctor, evidently having advanced still further into the gloom. ‘Ultra-high frequency, but undoubtedly a distress signal.’ Abruptly he raised his voice. ‘Am I right?’

From out of the darkness there emanated a low-level squelching noise. Lionel peered through the gloom, just able to make out some kind of indeterminate movement.

‘I have been growing for centuries,’ intoned a throaty voice from out of the shadow. ‘I was but a tiny egg when I crash-landed on this planet. For years I have grown, first in the tree in which I embedded myself and then in the attic constructed from the wood of that tree.’

‘And your distress signal has been sounding all that time?’ ventured the Doctor, barely visible in the gloom. ‘I’m the Doctor, by the way. This is my accomplice, Miss Melanie Bush, and somewhere in the darkness is our new friend from the Council. Say hello to the nice creature.’

‘Hello,’ said Lionel woodenly.

A sucking noise issued from out of the darkness and Lionel thought he could see something waving: something that looked an awful lot like a massive antler or pincer.

‘It is not a distress signal,’ gurgled the voice irritably. ‘It is a call for

reinforcements.'

'But something's keeping you in the attic, isn't it?' responded the Doctor levelly. 'You can't come out, can you? What is it you need,

I wonder?'

At this, a heavy scuttling noise resounded across the wooden floor. The creature was moving forwards, with slow deliberation, although Lionel got the impression it could move a lot quicker if it had to. It pulled itself through the darkness and Lionel could discern a vast carapace, a set of gigantic mandibles and, bobbing on two enormous antennae, a pair of blinking eyes. He could even make out an exposed space at the top of the carapace, which housed a throbbing, huge brain. Goo dripped from the beak between its mandibles.

The creature's voice emerged from somewhere deep within its thorax: 'My optical perceptors are inadequate to the task of seeing on this planet. I had to take... some new eyes.'

Lionel heard the Doctor's voice in the shadow. 'Good grief. The old lady.'

Lionel's eyes widened with horror at the memory of the elderly woman's groping progress along the hallway. In that moment he turned to see the door of the attic slamming shut and heard a series of locks being snapped determinedly into place.

'Unfortunately the elderly human's eyes are also inadequate to the task,' continued the creature, goo spilling from its beak. 'They are feeble, myopic. I tasked her with finding new eyes for me. And

she brought the three of you.'

'And in return she gets her old eyes back? Or so you told her?'

said the Doctor. 'And which one of us are you going to pick, pray

tell?'

The creature's voice gurgled furiously from between its clattering

mandibles. 'I am a *lady*! I want the *female*!' And with that the creature shot forward across the floor towards Mel.

Lionel whirled to see Mel trying and failing to scream as she

backed away in horror. In another second he was aware that he was

being grabbed from behind, and that the Doctor was snatching his

canister of insecticide from his shoulder.

The Doctor launched himself at the rear of the scuttling creature,

aiming the nozzle of the canister towards the creature's exposed

brain. The creature, evidently reacting to his footsteps, whirled

around and grabbed the Doctor in its mandibles, flinging him into

the corner of the attic with a terrific crash. With a gush of

satisfaction, the creature returned to its prey, the still quaking, still silently screaming Mel.

Through the semi-darkness a woman's voice suddenly sounded,

faltering at first but gradually increasing in confidence.

'He said Lordy-Lordy leapers, I like your gooseberry peepers...'

The voice rang out from the other side of the attic, and in that

moment everything, save the motes of dust dancing in the half-light

from the window high up in the roof, froze into tableau.

The creature abruptly stopped, confused, less than half a metre from Mel. It turned, myopically, and began to head towards the source of the female voice, evidently unaware it was actually scuttling back towards the Doctor. Lionel continued to croon the song, simultaneously struggling to maintain his projection and to remember the lyrics, while trickles of hot sweat crept down his back. In the half-light, Lionel could make out the prostrate figure of the Doctor grabbing his second chance, and he knew the ploy was working.

A loud gaseous blast roared, which Lionel instantly recognised as the sound of the insecticide being released. This was followed by a terrific shriek of pain as the creature's synapses began to freeze, and then an almighty clatter as the giant bug keeled over onto its carapace.

The creature floundered on its back, its stolen, elderly eyes peering mournfully at Lionel until eventually its antennae ceased to twitch at all.

The process of detaching the elderly woman's eyes from the antennae of the dead insect was, it transpired, a straightforward one, involving some clever fiddling on the Doctor's part and the deft employment of an ice cream scoop purloined from a cutlery drawer. Replacing the eyes in the sockets of the elderly woman was rendered only slightly more problematic by the woman's weak attempts at qualifying her actions, which the Doctor met with an implacable, disapproving silence.

At the end of the driveway Lionel parted company with the

strange duo. The Doctor flashed Lionel a big grin, and Lionel felt altogether compelled to remove his glove in order to shake the curious man vigorously by the hand. With slightly more hesitation Lionel accepted a kiss on the cheek from Mel, half expecting one of the flowers on her dress to shoot water into his face, but it didn't. Lionel watched the Doctor and Mel disappear up the road, and stood for a moment, lost in contemplation. After a moment he pulled off his gas mask and let it drop limply into one of the nearby dustbins.

He hummed *The Girl with the Gooseberry Peepers* to himself as he strode back down the street. If you looked close enough, you could actually see his lips moving.

43

The Misadventure of

Mark Thorne

Andy Frankham

An Adventure of Mark Thorne,

with the Fifth Doctor and Vizlor Turlough

'Look, it's perfectly simple. Mayonnaise, lettuce, tomatoes, bacon. Come on, for crying out loud – you can't be that thick!'

Mark Thorne looked down at the trembling hands of his trainee, and smiled. This was power. In this kitchen he was the king of the hill, and all who came here to work had to bow before him. The trainee started adding the seasoned mayonnaise with a knife. Mark tutted loudly, and snatched the knife out of the trainee's hands.

‘No, no, no! You’re using the wrong knife now.’ He put the knife in the sink and reached for the one with the serrated edge. He knew his little monkey had been using the correct knife, but that was hardly the issue. It was about power.

Power could so easily be taken away, with enough determination. And since leaving work events had conspired to do such a thing to Mark. He looked back on the last few hours, still barely able to comprehend what had happened, wondering just how the heck he’d got into his present pickle. Storming out of work, being jostled by the ever-growing crowd in Cardiff Central Station, and tumbling into the blue box that was bigger inside than out Tumbling into the solid base of some kind of control unit. Seeing a concerned face looking down at him as everything went dark. Waking up, to find two guys looking at him. Waking up again, alone in a strange bed. Stumbling back towards the doors and...

He was in the middle of a field. The grass beneath his feet was a kind of orange, contrasting horribly with the garish green sky above. In the distance he could see trees, although they weren’t like any tree he’d ever seen. The trunks were an ashen white, with leaves of baby blue. Mark smiled. He could deal with this. Of course it was a shock, but he was Mark Thorne and he was not the

type to crumble easily. He shook his head, wishing he’d brought his sunglasses with him. The colour scheme, coupled with the mild case of concussion, was giving him a granddaddy of a headache.

‘Hello?’ he called out, before it occurred to him that it might have been a better idea to keep quiet. He had no idea where he was, or indeed what kind of people populated a place like this. He glanced back at the blue box once more, making sure he got a complete picture of its location in his mind. Wherever he was, whatever he was going to find here, this box was his ticket home. And he had no intention of losing it.

He followed a road into a built-up area. Once more he was faced with the startling differences between cities he knew and the one before him. He was probably being generous likening it to a city – it was more of a small town, in size at least – but there was something about the grandiose nature of the buildings that made him think city. They reminded him of something, the way they were all carved out of stone, although he couldn’t think what. It was as if the mountains themselves, which he had only just noticed now stood on either side of him, were part of the city.

All he needed to find were some people.

He walked deeper into the city and heard the sound of scuffling.

For a moment he stood there, fighting the panic that chose that moment to surface. It wasn’t like he’d not been expecting to find people. He could deal with it. He was a people person, wasn’t he? Besides, whatever he was going to find couldn’t be any madder than everything he’d seen so far.

Famous last words, he thought, when he turned the corner.

First he noticed the two men backing up against the stone wall.

He’d seen them before, of course. The blond-haired man in the

cricketing whites had been there when Mark had banged his head on that column, telling Mark everything would be fine before he lost consciousness. And then later, when Mark had woken up in the strange bedroom, both men had been there. The younger man with the ginger hair had said nothing, but the blond man had introduced himself as a doctor, and advised Mark to rest some more. Mark didn't need rest, but naturally not trusting his kidnappers, went on to examine his eyelids a little anyway. Neither man had been there when Mark had decided to stretch his legs, and now he knew why. Like him they'd clearly decided to explore their new surroundings. A decision they were now regretting, it seemed. The ginger man was clearly out of his depth, a fact that made Mark grin. But the other man seemed perfectly at ease. He was even offering out a hand and a smile to the aliens who were cornering them.

Mark's eyes lingered on the aliens. Yes, aliens! Not people at all.

He swallowed instinctively, unable to turn away. They stood almost four feet taller than the two men, and as wide as both of them put side by side. Their skin, what he could see of it through the haphazardly spaced tufts of coarse hair, was an oily black.

Mark backed away a bit, so that he was mostly hidden by the edge of the corner.

'No need for any hostilities. Perhaps introductions would be best here? This is Turlough, and I'm the Doctor. You are?'

The two aliens turned to each other, and for the first time Mark

got a good look at their faces. They had one huge eye in the centre, with big, slobbering lips, saliva dripping. The hygiene-conscious chef in Mark shuddered when he saw how the saliva matted the already coarse hair sprouting out of the aliens' chests.

That decided it. His survival instinct was higher than his desire to be a hero. He quietly slipped away, leaving the men to their fate.

He didn't get far. He turned around just in time to notice another two aliens come up behind him. Mark swallowed hard. Seeing them at a distance was one thing, but up close... Mark had never been a small guy, both in height and build; he'd always been superior to most. But now, as he looked up and up and up, he felt like a midget.

'Erm. Hey,' he said, his voice never having sounded so small.

Then he grimaced as spittle landed on his head and the aliens smiled. At least, Mark hoped it was a smile. It was so difficult to tell through all their drooling.

They had introduced themselves as Trawets and Syhr, leaders of the Shev. Although, considering the way they were always moving around him, Mark had great difficulty remembering which was which; they really did look exactly the same. He had expected something sinister, but instead they constantly talked to him, offering him food. A sign of respect for an honoured guest, or some such, Mark assumed. Either way, one thing was certain: they loved their grub.

Right now they sat around a table, various meat dishes filling up most of the table's surface. Mark finished chewing a strange purple

item. It had the juiciness of a pear with the taste similar to a banana. As his taste buds danced with the flavour, he idly wondered what sort of dessert he could make with this alien fruit.

'Can I see more of this place?' he asked, now fully contented. It was relaxing, having someone else prepare the food, while he just ate without having to worry about telling idiots what to do all the time. 'First time, erm, off world, so I'm figuring I need to soak up the experience.'

Trawets – at least he assumed it was Trawets – turned to Syhr.

Mark watched them, wondering what that look meant. He'd always been good at reading body language but with these two it was nigh on impossible. Syhr slowly nodded his large head, and Trawets returned his attention to Mark with what Mark now knew to be a smile.

'Walk is good,' Trawets said.

On reflection Mark realised he liked it here. Sure, everything was so alien but the Shev were so damned friendly. The daft creatures had respect for him and he hadn't even had to shout at them. He was surrounded by at least ten of them now, and all were watching as he prepared a dessert using the purple pear-banana thing as the centrepiece. It had taken him a few moments to familiarise himself with the alien utensils, and then he was off!

As he continued with his ad-hoc creation, putting himself once more up there with the gods of culinary discipline, his mind drifted back to his life in Cardiff. He was, he thought in all modesty,

clearly an undiscovered genius. Too good for the city, as drab and cold as it was. But here he had a purpose, a fellowship with the Shev that he just didn't have back home. Maybe, he considered, he wouldn't bother trying to find the two guys. This planet was vibrant, and it made him feel alive.

A sound rang out, and he looked up from his dish. Whatever the sound meant it sent a ripple through his audience that superseded anything he had to say. They started talking to each other animatedly, jumping with unsuppressed excitement.

'What's going on?' he asked.

One of the Shev, possibly Trawets, turned to him, saliva drooling even more than usual. 'Food has escaped. Now we join the hunt.'

Well, Mark had never hunted for food before. Living in a city it had never been necessary, not when there was a Tesco on hand.

'When in Rome,' he said, standing up. 'Let's go chicken hunting!'

'Yes! You lead us, we follow you. You smell the food better.'

Mark wasn't entirely sure what was meant by that, since the Shev had bigger noses than he did, but he was game. His chest swelled with pride. Oh, yes, move over Gordon Ramsay. It was the Mark Thorne show now.

'Yeah, why not?'

Trawets soon took over, since it became obvious early into the hunt that Mark just didn't have the nose for it after all. This wasn't a problem for him as he was a chef, not a hunter. So the chase

continued, through the city, out over the hills, and onto the burned orange pastures. All the while the Shev were getting more and more

excited, and Mark was finding it hard to keep up with them. For all their bulk they were incredibly fast. Occasionally he slipped on the ever-dripping saliva. Now, Mark loved food as much as the next man, possibly more, but he was beginning to get turned off by the constant slobbering.

Finally, they caught up with their prey. And Mark pulled back in shock. Surrounded by a good twenty Shev were the two men he'd seen earlier. For a few moments Mark was stuck trying to process this development. He wanted to deny it, pretend the men were simply helping the Shev in their hunt, just as he was, but too much was coming together. The huge meal, the friendliness of the natives, why walking would be good for him, and now this...

'Oh, God,' he whispered. 'I'm your Hansel, aren't I?'

Trawets and Syhr looked at him, then at each other, and made a motion that seemed to be a rough approximation of a shrug.

'You eat people?' Mark forced himself to ask, just to clarify his point. At this, Trawets nodded. Mark worked his mouth, words momentarily failing to find their way out. And then, blurting with all the indignation he could manage – which was a lot – ' *You eat people?* '

Syhr came over to them. 'Human meat is the best kind, but is so rare. We not eat it often, but when we do...' He licked his lips, sending saliva in Mark's direction. 'Trawets thinks it is better to get to know your food first. I think Trawets is right now. Much more

satisfying.'

Mark didn't know what to say. There was really nothing more he could say. But he knew one thing for sure. The two men hadn't seen him so they wouldn't know he could have saved them. He wasn't a hero and he wasn't going to be served up like a Sunday roast. He turned and pegged it.

As he ran he heard laughter behind him. He had got used to the Shev laughter, even finding it strangely addictive. But now it made his skin crawl. So he ran faster.

Mark knew they were close behind. He doubled back on himself, running through the city, hiding from time to time in the shadows. If he stayed on the right track he knew he could find his way back to the blue box. If nothing else, his running hopefully was enough of a distraction to allow the two men a chance to escape: hero or not, he didn't like the idea of them being devoured by the Shev! He just hoped they were heading back to the box too. Either way, he had to get into that box, or else he'd be dead meat.

He shuddered, poked his head around the corner to make sure the way was clear, and shot out of the shadows. Before him was the

brick road. The path to freedom.

On the horizon he saw the box, and let out a sigh of relief. But like a kick in the chest the sigh was ripped away from him when he noticed that the door of the box was closing behind the wimpy ginger guy.

Mark shouted out, and doubled his speed, ignoring the stinging

stitch in his side. He had to reach the box, to let them know he was here. Surely they wouldn't go without him.

'Wait! You can't leave me here!'

He was wrong. Before he could reach the box a wrenching noise filled the air. He recognised it as the same noise he had heard in Central Station, which seemed so long ago now. His running turned into a stagger, which in turn devolved into little more than a crawl on the grass as he witnessed the box fade into nothingness. Mark screwed his eyes shut, realising that neither man was aware they'd left him behind. He imagined them going to the bedroom to check up on him, only to find he was gone. By then it would be...

He heard the grass pressing beneath the pressure of many large feet.

Spittle landed on his head. Then, a voice.

'Trawets was right. Much more satisfying.'

49

Attachments

Scott Handcock

An Adventure of Oliver Day, with the Fourth Doctor

From: "Oliver Day" ollieboy87@wrabbitmail.net

To: "Chloe Elliot" <elliot5478@brum.ac.uk>

Sent: Tuesday, February 13, 2007 03:39 AM

Subject: Long time, no speak!

Attachments: me_and_TARDIS34afs8ad76.jpg (0.14 MB)

Hiya,

Sorry I've not been in touch much lately – things have been more than a little mad here, what with the accident and everything... Well, actually, things have been a lot mad here – madder than you could possibly imagine, in fact – but I'll come onto that in a second.

Fingers crossed, it'll all make sense in the end!

Anyway, how are you?! Did the exams go okay? Sure you aced them, but it's probably safer to ask just in case ;o) Like I said, I'm really sorry I've not been able to be there for you recently, but I have been thinking of you. I would have sent a text or something, but I've not actually been in the country for a while, otherwise I would have...

Yup, that's right! I finally managed to find some time to get away and recuperate for a bit... And, yeah, I know I should have told you when I was off, but it was a spur-of-the-moment thing. At least now you know I've not just disappeared off the face of the Earth, never to be seen again. Hey, it could happen!

On a slightly more serious note, I wanted to say a proper thank you for everything you've done recently. Here's hoping you never have to wake up alone in the middle of the night, no idea where you are, why you're there, and with more tubes down your throat than it's humanly possible to accommodate (God bless the NHS)... But having you there really did make all the difference, and if it hadn't been for your support, who knows where I might have ended up! So cheers for that :o)

Obviously I can't remember how much the nurses told you back

then (I was too busy drifting in and out of consciousness to pay it much attention, I think), so I should probably come clean about a few things now I have the chance... (Not necessarily the easiest thing in the world given I still can't remember all the events that led to 'the incident' in the first place, but let's give it a go!)

Thinking about it, it was the memory loss thing that made this whole situation difficult in the first place – and that's only because it was terrifying as hell! Think about it... A whole chunk of my life had somehow managed to go missing, and I didn't have the slightest clue how to get it back, or if I even could. And that's not even the worst bit. The worst bit's when you start questioning everything and everyone around you – all because you can't be sure what is and isn't real any more. Not even you... I mean, obviously I remembered you, how could I not?! Deep down, I know I'd have been able to talk to you about our 'life' together – however real it may or may not have been – and you'd have been able to confirm every detail of it: which side of the bed you slept on; our first kiss to *Mr Brightside* at Glastonbury; how much the electricity bills came to each month, and how Samantha always refused to pay them...!

Even next-door's cat, the one who thinks he's a dog. Bless him!

And, yes, he does think he's a dog. I don't care what any of you say – it's fact! :oP

None of that was the problem, though. What was the problem was that along with losing my short-term memory I was also beginning to remember impossible things I'd experienced in the long term. And I mean really impossible things...!

Does that all make sense, btw? Cos reading it back, I'm not entirely sure that it does! I guess what I'm trying to say is that,

despite all the things I 'knew' about us, a whole set of other memories had somehow managed to come from nowhere – things that simply couldn't have happened to me in a million years! I thought they were nightmares at first. You know, the ones where you wake up, heart pounding, and find you can't move for ten minutes until you know where you are?

Anyway, I think that's why I tried avoiding you for so long, and why I had no choice but to go behind your back the way I did. It's nothing serious, I promise. Well, I guess it kinda is, actually, but it's not what you're thinking. Probably...

It seemed so ridiculous then but I was convinced that I'd spent the last few months of my life travelling to other planets and back through time with an alien superbeing called the Doctor... as you do! (Best bit is I can imagine the look on your face having read that sentence, but do keep reading! Please...)

Anyway, the Doctor was a really sound bloke – bit weird – and

his spaceship was even more incredible than he was! I mean, the man himself was already larger than life (think Tigger on Prozac and you're kinda there), so his spaceship seemed to be just another extension of that. And it could travel in time too! Oh!! That explains why I'd been gone for months but really only for a day. Duh!!!

But, yes, on the outside, his spaceship was a bit like an old blue shed or something – the same shape as a phone box, only bigger...

Then you'd step inside, and that's when it became impossible! I still don't quite understand how it worked – and I don't just mean the technology, but the scale of it. It was massive! You could lose yourself in it for days on end, doing everything and nothing you've ever dreamed of: its own little world, crammed into a phone box! How mad is that?!

Anyway, I should probably stop there and get back to the point before I start to sound like a total nutter! Yeah, yeah, how would you tell?! ;o) The point is, while I remembered my past life with you like it was yesterday, my delusions of travelling with the Doctor were just as vivid. So how was I meant to work out which of you was real? I mean, how could I have been gone for months but also only gone for a day? For all I knew, either one of you might have been a figment of my overactive, morphine-assisted imagination, and that's why I tried to shut you out so much in those first few weeks, just so I had time to try to get my head sorted. I remember thinking that I was on some alien planet and that you were some kind of trick or illusion – you know, like on *Battlestar Galactica* or something and that the Doctor would come and tell me to concentrate! And, yeah, I think I needed that time in the end just to work out that that wasn't going to happen...

It wasn't anything to do with you, though, so please don't start worrying about stuff like that! Everything just became so confusing for me – you and the Doctor both screaming at me inside my head to sort myself out... It actually started to hurt after a while. It was like leading some sort of twisted double life! I mean, back at the flat there was you, Sam, Adam and Gaz: my normal life of lectures, pubbing and work –a life that made some vague sort of sense,

somehow...! Then, at the same time, I had this mad life with the Doctor: travelling across the universe and meeting all sorts of monsters and stuff... God, why am I even telling you all this?! LOL! I still can't quite believe you stuck with me through all that, but then I guess you must have realised what I was going through, or maybe you just didn't need to. But whenever you visited, you helped me understand what was really happening just that little bit more, and I soon learned to listen to you. I even began picking up

on those throwaway nuggets of information you'd let slip in conversation, so I began matching them up with my own memories of our lives together – and it all made some kind of sense! I suppose I used you a bit by doing that, and I'm sorry. It wasn't fair, but I didn't have a choice. I'm sure you'll understand... The important thing was that suddenly I seemed to have my life back, and you were proof of that! You were real, and that's all that mattered. Then and now...

Obviously I couldn't tell you about the Doctor back then – I mean, how would I even begin?! 'By the way, Chloe, I went off with some guy and had the time of my life...!' Besides, I'd only just got you back! I wasn't going to risk losing you again for anything, let alone some random figment of my imagination! So I tried to forget about him. For us, I really did try. And, for the first week or so, it was actually quite easy. Life was suddenly new and exciting again, even if it was just nipping across to ASDA for a pint of milk and a loaf of white (you want brown, you buy it)! And that meant the world to me. For once in my life, I didn't want to ask questions.

I could finally relax...

Then, one day, the Doctor just flashed into my head for some reason. I can't remember why now, he just did. And that scared the hell out of me! Just when I thought I knew who I was again – who we were – the Doctor came back and ruined everything! He was back in my head now, and I knew I'd never be able to forget my other life with him. Whatever the cost, I had to find him, even if it meant losing you and your world as a result. Not that I would have... I mean, you were real – I had text messages and birthday cards to prove it! But as for the Doctor... he was something else entirely. I realised that you were both real.

All those times you found me on the internet in the middle of the night, I was looking for the Doctor. I know I made all kinds of excuses at the time, but then I also know you probably never believed any of them anyway! :oP

So, yeah, that's what I was up to all that time: every waking hour for weeks on end just spent looking for him. Well, almost every hour. And it wasn't easy... Not only did it take forever, but I never even knew if I'd find anything! I mean, would you really expect something like that to be true? It was mental – he wasn't real! How could he be?! And, even if he was, why should anyone on this planet even know about him, let alone post what they knew online?!

I did find something eventually, though. It wasn't him, obviously, just a community of people dedicated to, well, stalking him, I guess. A bit like Ben was back in the first year when he kept filling his

blog with all that stuff about Megan from Greek Drama, only she

was an actual person and he had a social life... But it was a start, and that's all I needed! So I signed up to every message board and

bookmarked every homepage I could find, all in the hope that I

might learn the truth about what really happened during my time

with the Doctor... And I heard absolutely flip all from anyone! (And I've just spent ages thinking of the word 'flip' so that this doesn't get sent to your Spam folder!) Maybe I was too mad even for

them?! (Don't say a word...)

Looking back at it now, it was all a bit sad really. None of these

people had ever met the Doctor, so none of them had even the

slightest idea what his world was about, or why it was worth so

much of their time and effort trying to become a part of it. Not that that's what any of them wanted, not really. They just wanted to

collect as much information as they could about him, to try to work

out who he might actually be or where he came from. And that was

fine. For them, I mean...

I needed more than just that though. I needed to meet him again,

face-to-face (although that kinda assumed I'd met him in the first

place)! I didn't necessarily want to go travelling again – I just

wanted to speak with him, find out who he was and why he'd left

me here. And I wanted to say a proper goodbye. Not sure why, I

just did!

After about a week or two I found what I'd been looking for.

Tucked away at the bottom of an online photo gallery were about

seventy different photos of the Doctor and his spaceship, all taken at various points in time, all over the world. And there, in one of those images, was me – with the Doctor – grinning like a loon!

I can't quite remember how I reacted to seeing myself there, to be honest, but it was that proper someone-walking-over-your-grave type feeling. I felt sick, I know that much, but I also felt excited, and just pleased that everything I thought had happened to me actually might have!

I still have no idea what the Doctor and I had been doing in Trafalgar Square on the day the photograph was taken (see attached). Not that that really mattered. These photos finally proved he existed, he was real. And if people were able to trace his movements on message boards for just a snapshot of him and his spaceship, well, maybe there was some hope for me after all! So I posted a message to the webmaster asking for help... Probably not the wisest move I've ever made, but there you go!

Anyway, I was dead careful to play down my involvement with the Doctor, obviously, especially having already seen how these people obsessed about him the way they did. So, all I said was that I thought I recognised someone in the picture so could they give me

any more info. And it worked too! Within a couple of hours, three or four guys (no girls!) had replied with little chunks of information, all of which tied in with my own memories of the Doctor and his spaceship, the TARDIS – and just being reminded what it was called was like a big breakthrough. They even told me the date the pic had been taken: 22 June 1999, probably around the same time

the real me had been busy flipping up his GCSE Chemistry! You've got to love this time-travel stuff, haven't you?! ;o)

It didn't stop there either. A few nights later, I was sent an email by one of the board members. The TARDIS had been spotted down in Selly Oak – not far from where the ambulance had found me all those weeks ago, come to think of it – and they were hoping I could get a few photos before it disappeared again. That's all they wanted! They didn't want me to track down the Doctor himself or break into the TARDIS; they just wanted a few pictures! So I went, but I didn't take my camera. I didn't take anything, actually, I just ran out. My phone, my wallet, my MP3 player: all back at the flat... and all because I needed to know that the Doctor was true.

I needn't have bothered. When I returned to the scene of my 'incident', I couldn't find a thing. There was no trace of the Doctor or his TARDIS, just the rubble from the explosion that had hospitalised me in the first place. So I explored. I snooped and poked and nosed around – all very Jack Bauer, dammit, Chloe! – until little moments of that night began trickling back to me, slowly but surely... I could picture the Doctor next to me like it was yesterday, back when the building was intact. I could trace our movements, work out where we'd been and what we'd been doing there... so I did. It was like I was reliving the night when everything broke. But then I remembered something else... I remembered the monster.

We'd met loads of monsters on our travels together, and he had always begged me not to refer to them as that. It was kind of a running gag we had, I think. He'd insist calling them 'monsters'

was just rude and unnecessary – that they were super-evolved extra-terrestrial beings or something... but for once this thing really was a monster. Really.

It was loads taller than me, with a really skinny body, a bit like one of those size-zero models you're always moaning about. And it just looked so... wrong. It just had the sort of face you could tell had never smiled in its life, and its skin was cracking round the edges, weeping and gaping around the eyes. Insane, scarlet, alien eyes...

That's when I saw them again for the first time since that night: those eyes, staring at me so clearly. But they weren't just in my head any more. Now they were standing right in front of me, again,

like on that first night...

After everything the Doctor and I had seen and met in outer space, this was the first time I'd ever been really afraid. And it wouldn't have mattered if I'd been trapped in Birmingham or on some random alien planet... For the first time in my life, I realised I was alone – and that's what scared me so much more than any monster ever could. There was no you, no Doctor, no Gaz or Adam... Just me and it.

Looking back, it hadn't even occurred to me that I might have been steered there, but now it seems so obvious. The last time we'd encountered this creature, the Doctor had managed to strand it on Earth and save the world, all in the same evening. Now it was out for revenge – had been for months – and if it couldn't have the Doctor's head, it wanted mine.

That's when I realised I was probably going to die, and I couldn't do anything to stop it...

Ahem.

Yes, I know I'm being terribly melodramatic here, but I think the situation warrants it, just a little... Because moments like that really do seem to put everything into perspective. I mean, I always thought I'd break down in floods of tears and start begging for my life or something in that situation, but I didn't. I didn't do anything, in fact.

It was odd – maybe I'd have reacted differently before the accident – but I just went completely numb. I mean, I was scared – course I was! – just not necessarily of dying, I don't think... I dunno, maybe there are just bigger things in life to be scared of? Maybe I was just pleased cos the monster was proof that I wasn't mad. Or maybe I'm just a little bit thick and should have tried legging it? Who can say?!

Then it happened. I'd never been around to see it before – I'd always been on the inside – so it was a really weird sensation to finally feel it. You see, when the TARDIS lands, you expect it to just appear and that's it, but that's so not how it works. It brings the whole of time and space with it – somehow – and you can feel that in the air, licking at the back of your neck, invigorating you, making you stronger... And the noise it makes is just insane! Utter chaos – like every event in history churned into one – but weirdly reassuring because of it. That's how the Doctor had explained it to me, anyway. Perhaps he was right...

But now he was finally here, I knew I was safe, and so did the

monster. I could see it consciously backing away from me and the TARDIS, as if it couldn't work out whether to retreat now and live to fight another day, or stand its ground to tackle the Doctor there 56 and then... It chose the latter. I think the Doctor could have punished it for making that decision, but he didn't. It's just not how he does things. Instead, he strolled out from the TARDIS – calmly stepping into this life-and-death situation as if it was the most casual thing in the world – and simply put his arm around me. Slowly, gently, he guided me backwards, away from the monster and into the TARDIS... Just by helping me back inside his spaceship, he rescued me, and that was enough! The monsters didn't matter any more, not for me. The Doctor could take care of them. And he did... He left me inside his spaceship while he sent the monster home. Or something.

So, yes, that's how the Doctor saved my life – that time anyway – and that's why I'm not around at the moment. I'm off touring the universe in a giant shed with a friendly alien, and I'm loving every minute of it!

I'll be back soon though, don't worry! The Doctor's said he'll try to nip back and pick you up when he gets a minute – he wants to meet the girl I won't stop talking about! But, yeah, how fantastic would that be: you and me going on the best student holiday ever?! Might even be able to finally fit Pompeii in somewhere! :oD So, yeah, when we get a break from the monsters and the madness, we'll come for you. Eek, that sounds like a threat!!

Seriously, though, I'm missing you like mad at the moment, but I

can't come back, not yet. I need to see all the amazing things this universe has to offer before heading home. Then I get to spend my life with the most amazing person on Earth... How lucky am I?! And, on that note, I should probably head off I'm in a cyber café in Rio de Janeiro and the Doctor's helping some bat-like creatures return to their own dimension or something. This email's already loads longer than I meant it to be. A bit like one of my flipping essays! Marks out of ten? ioP But, yeah, thought you ought to know what's going on, and that I'm safe, and that I really do think the world of you... however mad everything else may be right now!

Miss you,

Ollie xXx

Click hate to sign up for your free email account with White Rabbit!

57

There's Something About Mary

Simon Guerrier

An Adventure of Mary Barton, with the Doctor

4 September 2007

'It's going to be fine; says Dad and takes my hand in his. I grin at him like, yeah, we're in this together, but I don't feel any less twitchy.

Doesn't help that he's got his uniform on. I told him last time he wore it – to a funeral an 24 June –that it makes him someone else. He looks all serious and scary, as if he knows what he's doing. Really, Dad can't make a cup of tea by himself and he hardly ever gets cross.

Not men when North End lose a hundred-nil.

Though that happens about every week. Ha ha.

So we're both pretending to be things we're not. He's making out he's a soldier though he's the softest bloke you ever met. I'm dressed to look like a grown-up in my brand-new Rites Island suit.

'You want them to take you seriously, don't you?' Dad says. But I look like I work in a library. They'll burn me as a witch.

That's a joke too, right?

Hey, I'm Mary. If I'm talking too much it's because I'm a little bit nervous. And I had the biggest ever coffee on the train down from Preston. We came first class so the drinks are complimentary, which means you've already paid for them.

Rest class smells funny, like the insides of a new car. Not everyone dresses up for it either, so it isn't smart like on 'IV. One guy in a Razorlight T-shirt had his feet up on the seat opposite him, so all the muck that his Reeboks had walked in would get sat in by somebody else. And that's not what you pay for in first class!

I wanted to go over and say something but Dad would have

freaked. Especially after what I promised this morning about how much I was going to behave.

No, today I'm being utterly perfect. I'll just sit here in silence till they're ready to see me, my hand held safely in Dad's. I'm not telling jokes or asking him questions, and I'm certainly not letting on that I know that this very corridor is the one the Prime Minister uses.

58

For some reason that stuff kind of weirds people out. It's why

sometimes they think that I'm dangerous. And I'm not. It's just that weird stuff keeps happening to me.

11 October 1997

'Even the glass in the window caught fire,' said the reporter carefully. Behind him, a fire crew sludged foam into what once had been a shop, wrecking the Nintendo 64s and PlayStations not already lost to the flames. The reporter looked nervous – either

scared to be right in the blast zone or knowing this would be his big break. They would run this story on the national news, and not just on *North West Tonight*.

'As yet, there's been no official explanation from the authorities,' he continued gravely. 'They'll be investigating here throughout the night and well into tomorrow. But, as we've already heard, eye witnesses have talked of a huge explosion coming from inside the shop...'

The story cut to 'Maude Turner, Eye Witness', looking more than her 63 years. Stood by the Greggs a bit further down on Friargate, she described the fireball as 'all pink and blue'. Her eyes were alive with naked excitement at getting to be on the telly, but they quickly cut her off before she could suggest who she thought must have been responsible.

'Police aren't naming the three people killed in the blast until their families have been notified,' the reporter continued. 'But the main question this evening is *how* can something like this have happened?'

They never explained it, I don't think.

I don't remember being there in the middle of it. Not the noise, not the police, not the smell of the fire; nothing I've not seen on TV. I've seen the same footage so many times, 'guess it squeezed out my own memories. I remember the shop as it used to look before and I remember Dad telling me Mum was never coming home.

The shop sold tellies and stereos, and apparently our video had died. Mum had dragged me round the same shops for a few Tuesday mornings, to be sure that she got the best price. They were probably all pretty similar wherever we went, but this one shop had a guy behind the counter who always made her laugh. He was young and a student at the

place up the road, and it was never very serious.

He was one of the other two that died.

But I don't remember him that day. I have this vague memory of the same scrawny woman on 48 screens. It must have been a music video, but I couldn't tell you which one. She had these two gnarly horns on 59

her closely cropped head and danced about in amazing high heels.

They were made to look like she had hooves instead affect, and I remember being enthralled because she didn't fall over.

I remember my jaw hanging open, which Dad had told me was not

how a princess behaved. And I remember being crass became Mum

kept repeating, 'Come on, then,' and, 'Ifs time to go.' I just wanted to stay watching the magical woman, and when Mum grabbed my arm

to yank me away, I think I even snapped at hen.

And then... I don't know. I try to remember and all I get is the park near Gran's home in Reading, where we used to feed the ducks. A

safe place.

Maybe I got knocked unconscious, or there were fumes that got in my head. I ask Dad and he says that's quite usual considering, and not to worry about it.

The ducks had left her alone as soon as they saw she was breadless, strutting and clucking round the edge of the water while Mary sat raptly watching. She had scuffed the knees of her thick, stripy leggings but otherwise she'd not even been singed. At six years old she wore her hair in pigtails and a red Teletubby on her jumper. The man who came to collect her brandished a paper bag. Mary had been told not to take sweets from strangers, but she remembered the man from another time. She remembered he made Mummy cry.

‘You’re a long way from home,’ he said, and Mary wasn’t sure if she was getting told off. She continued to suck on the eye-watering fizzy fish, slowly smoothing its coarse, prickly surface. And without once looking at him directly, she examined the man.

He pretended to be younger than he really was. His coat was the same colour as inside a banana, with a leafy green vegetable over one heart. Mary didn’t like eating greens very much, but Dad said they gave you powers. Dad would have disapproved that the man wore plimsolls. In fact, Dad would have called the man scruffy, even though he looked sort of smart. As if, Mary decided, he’d once seen the suits worn by grown-ups and thrown something together a bit like them.

‘I ran away once,’ said the man after a while. ‘After doing something I shouldn’t have.’ He smiled to himself. ‘I’ve run away several times.’

‘I didn’t run,’ said Mary, not daring to look at him. ‘I didn’t.’

‘No,’ said the man. ‘But it will be getting dark soon. I think we should be getting you back.’ He turned to her. ‘What do you think?’

Mary liked that he said it like that, as if she got to make the decision. She felt a sudden thrill at the thought of telling him ‘No’, 60 of staying out just to be difficult. But she also felt bored and hungry, and anyway he was right – it *was* beginning to get dark.

‘’Kay,’ she said, having given it some thought. ‘Mummy and Daddy will be waiting.’

But she was only half right about that.

He said I wasn't in trouble, that I was still too young. Dad took me into town and into a dark, smelly building where the walls were oily and black. I had to play with my toys in a securely locked room that he must have thought would be soundproof. The grown-ups gathered more than 46 metres away, on the far side of securely locked doors.

I played with my toys and pretended not to hear them. Pretended 1

couldn't reach out across the corridor and in behind Dad's eyes. See and hear it all just as he did.

It's awful, I know. But I was too small to know any better.

'How can it not know what it is?' asked the general.

' *She*,' said Barton. 'How can *she* not know.' A hush fell over the room until Barton added, 'Sir.'

It was a little after six in an underground nightclub, directly below a low-cost supermarket. Above their heads, shoppers gathered brillo pads, waffles and washing-up liquid, and exchanged 'Hiyah's and 'Hey, love's and the latest vivid conspiracies about what had caused the explosion.

The men in the nightclub knew exactly what had happened. This shadowy, cigarette-smelly, nocturnal place was ideal to agree the response. They met here in secret, not even in uniform, all but one of them already decided. And even Barton saw the sense of their thinking.

All right, Captain,' conceded the general. 'But I think the point still stands. What are we going to do with her?'

No one spoke. Barton shifted uncomfortably, his shoes sticking to the carpet so rich in spilt drinks. He could remember coming to places like these years before, looking for available women. The

music was always too loud to be heard and the lights meant you could never see who you were chatting to. It probably helped pick someone up when they couldn't hear or see you.

With a terrible pang he realised he'd have to be back looking again, now that his wife was dead.

Mary, still peering out from inside his head, recoiled from this secret thought. Mum had only been dead a few hours and already he had betrayed her. She felt his wretched guilt, too young to comprehend it.

When she was alder and they had arguments, it remained at the back of her mind.

61

'She's a killer,' said one of the officers.

'She's a minor,' said one of the others.

'She needs taking care of,' said another. 'Permanently, like.'

There were murmurs of assent.

'She's my daughter,' said Barton. No one would meet his eye.

'I'll look out for her,' said someone in the shadows, who no one had noticed before. Two officers went for the guns in their holsters as the man came quietly forward. His smile was disarming if not quite appropriate, and he had the look about him of any of the trendy lot from the glorified poly up the road.

'Sorry I'm late,' said the Doctor. It had to be him, Barton knew, for all that he had changed. They said he'd been younger when he'd been in London, saving the new Prime Minister from the aliens. Barton thought he looked almost boyish, like the head of the school cricket team.

‘And what do we tell the families of the dead?’ asked the general, refitting to be intimidated. The Doctor fixed him with his steady gaze.

‘What do you ever tell them?’ he said sadly. ‘That you’re sorry for their loss. That everything’s being done to ensure that it can’t happen again.’

‘And what if she does this again?’ asked one of the other officers.

‘She won’t –’ began Barton, but the Doctor stayed his hand.

‘Let us at least try to help her. Please.’

‘And if she kills other people? Or starts a ruddy war?’

The Doctor sighed. ‘If that happens,’ he said, ‘then we’ll bring her to you. To dispose of however you see fit.’

When they came to get me I wanted to ask what they meant. Somehow I never got round to it. The doctor spent the whole time home telling us bad jokes. He could make you laugh until you had to hold your sides. Even Dad laughed, though I could see he was trying not to.

Mrs Elliot from next door had sat up waiting for them, and even opened some tins for supper. She tried to discuss the explosion, but the Doctor intercepted and asked about her spaniels, and Mrs Elliot was soon caught up in telling him.

Barton left them to it and headed up the stairs, his daughter in his arms. His feet were heavy with dread and he hesitated when he got to the landing. They had painted ‘MARY’ in fat, pink letters on her bedroom door, and he remembered how the glitter had got everywhere, to be found in their clothes and hair for weeks afterwards.

Eyes misted by tears, he looked down on the cuckoo who had

killed the woman he loved. Barton had been a soldier for more than a decade and not stinted to kill creatures from outer space who dared threaten the peace of the country. Who dared threaten the lives of ordinary people, just like his dead wife had been.

And this time?

Mary's small feet stuck out over his elbow, one of them wearing a sock. She wore the dungarees her Gran had bought her, and her face nestled amid a zoo of soft animals. Her eyes were tightly screwed up and she wore a very serious expression, pretending to be fast asleep.

He reached a hand out to her. The words of the officer echoed in his head: 'And what if she does this again?'

Mary opened one eye and looked up at him.

'Dad?' she said.

He could only hold her.

It's all then pretty boring until I'm nearly 11 and Dad explains that I'm different. My best friend, Manpreet, had already had her mum telling her about all that mum stuff, so I'd kind of expected the same.

To be honest I was mortified Dad didn't ask anyone else to do it. He was seeing Megan at the time, with a flat above a shop and this dopey old cat. I never made it easy for them – I could be a right brat. But still, the talk would have been better from a woman.

Maybe that was the point and I was being punished.

30 May 2002

They sat beside each other on the edge of her bed, glittery pin-ups of Blue looking down on them.

‘So,’ said Dad after nearly an eternity.

‘So,’ said his brilliant daughter.

Dad nodded, considering this point. And then he added, ‘Well…’

Mary grinned. ‘Fine, thanks for asking. How are you?’

He shook his head. ‘What did I do to deserve a comedienne?’ he asked of no one in particular. And then he turned to her with deadly seriousness in his eyes and said, ‘You’re not like other girls, Mary.’

She could never be sure when he was having her on, he kept his face so straight. Once she’d been convinced he was joking about armadillos being real, because he said it so lightly. And the pictures he showed her did look like someone had glued them together. He’d never let her forget that one.

But now, looking into his steely grey eyes, she could see he meant every word of it. And that was so unsettling she pretended to think otherwise.

‘I’m your favourite princess, aren’t I?’ she replied, in the funny

sing-song voice that had always been a joke between them. He kept gazing at her and she had to look away. Staring at the floor just below her dangling feet, she knew that he knew that she knew.

He draped an arm around her shoulders and hugged her close to him. ‘You always will be,’ he said. ‘But being different. That means you have to be careful.’

‘Careful,’ she repeated, pulling away from him. It struck her he meant the same things as Manpreet’s mother. ‘Is this going to be about boys?’

He laughed, suddenly and surprisingly. ‘Okay,’ he said, rolling

his eyes. ‘Yes, we should talk about boys. But there’s something

else you need to know first.’

So he told me I was adopted. It’s terrible really – he gets so insistent that it won’t change anything and he’ll still always be there to look after me, it’s like I can’t be upset about it myself It would hurt his feelings too much.

And I’m okay about it. Really. I’d kind of thought there had to be something. Dad can get gloomy every now and then, and finds it

difficult even to look at me. He’s always worse just before my check-ups. Because of what happened to me in the accident when Mum died, I get seen by a special doctor. Yeah, the one from the park and the ducks. He comes to the house every year to do tests and ask questions.

It’s all right, really – the doctor tells ancient jokes and pretends he’s someone else just because he’s got different clothes on. That’s about as hilarious as he gets.

There’s something wrong in my arms and legs. I guess I broke them when I was little and they had to put metal pins in. It means I set off the scanners in airport security and Dad has to show them this

official letter or get out his old army ID. Sometimes we miss a flight because he’s held up signing the papers.

But now he can tell me what he knows of my parents: they’re dead and they had something genetic.

What bothers me is that it stayed a secret so long. Dad won’t shut up about other things, and can’t let me watch telly in peace. Yet he used to be in the army and he can’t talk about what he did. He’s carrying things that are horrid. I think that people he served with got killed.

So him not telling means it’s like it’s one of his work things. Like national security is at stake.

But I’m just boringly normal, really, no different from anyone at school. ‘Normal’ in that I’m suddenly much taller and a different shape entirely and earning the strangest attention from boys.

But I’m not going to tell you about any of that. That’s all strictly 64

private.

3 July 2004

Rory wore a small, gold stud through the top of his left ear and shabby corduroy trousers. He never seemed to notice what other people said about him, or never seemed to care. Mary lived a couple of streets away from him and it wasn't hard to share the walk home. One Wednesday, after she'd explained the offside rule and how a team made transfers, she announced she was going to kiss him. Rory shrugged noncommittally, the same way he did when picked on by teachers. 'I don't really know how,' he said.

Mary took his face in her hands and went up on tiptoe to reach him. He smiled right at the last minute and she struggled not to giggle herself. But soon they had the hang of it. What they never tell you, thought Mary, is how to angle your head so your noses don't smack each other.

They held hands the whole way up Norris Street, not needing to say a word to each other. Mary had no idea how long they'd been snogging but the street lights had begun to come on.

The awful thought struck her a moment before she set eyes on her dad, barrelling down the pavement towards them. She didn't think anything the less of Rory for letting go of her hand.

'I... I meant to text you,' she said as meekly as possible. Dad looked quickly between them. He was angry, yes, but also terribly afraid. She wondered if something had happened.

'What the hell were you doing?' he said.

‘We –’ spluttered Mary.

‘I –’ began Rory at exactly the same time.

And to their great amazement, Mary’s dad started laughing. Rory was invited to tea.

1 November 2006

This year her doctor wore a multicoloured costume, like he’d spent the weekend on a march. Mary could just see him as the campaigning type too. He asked her the usual odd questions. What was 14 times 67? When had she last been out of breath? Did she think he’d put on weight since last year?

When he asked about boyfriends she just couldn’t help crying. She’d not even told Dad about Steve.

‘I saw him with Alicia Mackenzie,’ she explained once she’d dried her eyes. Her doctor smiled a sad, cat-like smile she’d never seen before.

‘Then I suppose he wasn’t worth the effort.’

Mary nodded numbly, holding back the tears. ‘I wanted to…’ she said. ‘I just wanted to…’

The doctor’s smile faltered. ‘Did you do something to him?’ he said with frightening calm. ‘You did something you wish that you hadn’t?’

She couldn’t bear the way that he looked at her, and buried her head in her hands. The doctor waited patiently. ‘Mary, I am on your

side.'

'I did something terrible,' she wailed from inside the nest of her

fingers.

'What did you do?' he said kindly. She looked up at him, feeling

her make-up run in long rivulets, zebra-striping her face.

'I told him I was in love with him.'

Well, anyway, then we're meant to think about A levels. School did this careers advice thing, which was no help whatever unless you'd always dreamt of working in filing. One teacher said we could change our minds later, depending how GCSEs went. Yeah, I'm thinking, ifs a good idea to commit the whole rest of your life to your luck with the multiple guess.

We file into the hall every Friday morning to hear bids from

different teachers about why their subjects rock. Yes, they use the word 'rock'. It's pathetic, really. Mr Harrison tells us we've already got an advantage doing geography because we live in our own little micro-climate and that's why it rains all the time. Mrs Cohen rings Dad to talk about me doing Applied Maths and I tell hint she's out of her tree. I bet she rang everyone else's parents with the same thing.

And then one Friday six of us sit at the back of the hall, giggling at this really fit bloke. He hardly looks out of school himself, but he seems to know what he's talking about. Ifs not about being some kind of tough nut, he says, and getting to carry a gun. He's got this PowerPoint show about the projects they work on – houses and

bridges and helping people out. They go wherever it's really

dangerous and try to make things better.

And I run home afterwards, knowing Dad will be over the moon.

'What?' he says, laughing already.

'Dad,' I tell him, 'I've figured out what I am.'

He's not laughing all of a sudden. And what's that?'

'I'm going to be a soldier.'

14 May 2007

She stood right at the heart of a whirl of ice and ignored him as he approached. Mary must have grown in the months since she'd last seen him; he seemed so very much smaller.

66

He'd wrapped his paisley scarf tight around his face to protect him from the blue and glittering storm. One hand kept his straw hat crammed on to his head, the other used his umbrella for balance. He had not unfurled it for fear of catching the 1,243-mile-an-hour winds, and being carried off into the night.

Good, she thought. She stood easily here and his discomfort made it easier to play this cool.

Mary knew she mustn't get angry. She felt tall and newly strong, powers as yet untested in her taut and adult limbs. Her doctor looked silly and minuscule beside her. Once she would have grinned at him, bridged the gap between them. Instead she breathed in air tangy with hydrogen and methane, waiting for him to speak first.

'They're going to wonder about your footprints,' he said from deep within his scarf.

Mary had never before noticed his accent. A small part of her brain identified a square kilometre near Clydebank and made a guess at the vast distance he'd travelled since. Another part of her brain scrolled through hundreds of townships and cities a 15-year-old from Plungington really shouldn't ever have heard of

'There's a resource probe here in '62,' he went on. 'Studies the

marks in the ice. Its findings caused quite a furore. Luckily I'm a magpie for that sort of detail, and your dad told me what you were wearing.' He twirled his stylish umbrella and pointed the end at her feet. 'Miss Sixtys, size five.' She smiled despite herself. Yet also she saw that his eyes kept on moving. Steve had been the same, always looking over her shoulder for fear of missing anyone cooler than she was.

'Expecting someone?' she said.

'Only the Neptunians. I don't suppose you thought to bring a passport, did you?'

'I didn't think I'd need one.'

'Well, let's hope not. But maybe we should get inside anyway.'

Mary's friend Erin had once tried to convert her to vegetarianism by showing her a DVD about cows. A long avenue of them strolling placidly into an abattoir where they'd get made into burgers. Mary had felt little sympathy.

'They're too stupid,' she told the ashen-faced Erin. 'Too trusting when they should be afraid.'

And yet she indulged her doctor, following him back across the ice-strewn, rocky prairie towards an incongruous shape. Her eyes strained through the flicking, whispering gale to make sense of the oblong doorway, a little taller than a man. Beyond it lay an impossibly sprawling, bright, white space. The small parts of her

brain were in meltdown: it really didn't make sense.

But the doctor strolled comfortably on inside and she wouldn't be too chicken to follow him. He toyed with the controls on the central tabletop and heavy doors closed smoothly behind her.

'This is some sort of laboratory, is it?' she asked. She recognised enough of the controls to see it must be some kind of mobile unit, and had a vision of the doctor whizzing from one emergency to the next, trying the same odd jokes and tests on whoever needed him. Her senses prickled with questions, yet she also felt calm and easy. She had been here before, she felt certain.

'It's my home,' said the doctor.

'You don't have a girlfriend, do you?'

He waggled bushy eyebrows at her. 'You're my friend, aren't you?'

'Not like that! You need someone to drag you round IKEA. This place needs cushions and stuff.'

They discussed wallpaper while he checked her blood and the electricity inside her brain. She was surprised to remember all the totals of votes from last year's *Big Brother*. The doctor pretended not to mind that she couldn't do the same for last month's local elections, but that stuff didn't really interest her.

'On balance you seem happy enough,' he said as he stuffed his notebook back into a pocket.

'I'm fine,' she said, the same stop-pestering-me tone usually reserved for Dad.

'If you say so,' said the doctor. 'But why the argument?'

‘Oh, that.’

‘Yes, that.’

‘What did he tell you?’

He narrowed his eyes. ‘I want to hear it from you.’

She hung her head. ‘He said I wasn’t responsible.’

‘So you showed him by running away?’

‘No!’ she said, and she must have shouted because for an instant he almost looked frightened. ‘No,’ she said more gently. ‘I just wanted some space to think.’

‘You can’t run forever,’ he said quietly. ‘Trust me. Home catches up with you sooner or later.’

‘You ran away too. I remember you telling me.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Back when you didn’t tower over me. You’d got yourself to Prospect Park, not ten minutes’ walk from your nan’s house.’

‘The day that Mum died.’

That’s right.’

Mary considered. ‘But I was out shopping with Mum. I couldn’t

have been in Reading on that day.’

‘It’s not very likely, is it?’ said the doctor. He gazed out through the laboratory window on to the silent hurricane outside. Men in bulky green uniform were gathering just within sight, moving slowly but with evident purpose. Mary thought for a moment they must be something military before she realised they weren’t even

men.

‘Um,’ she said. ‘Where actually are we?’

The Doctor appraised her with that same sad look as the vet had when they’d put down Mr Fluffypants.

‘In the shadow of the Le Verrier valley. Though I don’t think it’s been called that yet.’

‘And how long have I been away?’

The controls bleeped and twittered as he worked them. ‘Two hours. It’s just gone 22 minutes past seven.’

Mary’s brow crinkled as stray thoughts fought not to come together. Then suddenly she brightened. ‘What?’ he said.

‘Can this thing get me home for *EastEnders*?’

Dad doesn’t say anything, just hugs me.

I tell him I won’t join the army and that’s a great relief to both of them. I just liked what the man at school said about how they try to help. That’s the sort of soldier Dad must have been and I thought I could make him proud.

It’s awkward for a while, so I say I’m going to go to bed and leave the adults talking. But even with the bathroom door locked and the cold tap running loudly, I can hear every word they’re saying.

‘She didn’t do any harm,’ says Dad.

‘She very nearly started an inter-planetary war with Neptune. I’ve got weeks of forms to fill in. You’ll have to take her to –’

‘No!’

‘They really just want to help her. You know she needs protecting.

From herself if nothing else.’

‘No,’ says Dad in a voice so tiny I want to run back downstairs and defend him. The doctor doesn’t say anything, so I guess he’s doing one of his

stares.

'I'll take her,' says Dad after a moment. 'Just let her finish her exams.'

For a few days he's spoiling me rotten – we go see a musical about naughty puppets and have tea in the place from the 30s. I get some new jeans and a really cool top. Oh, and that's when we get the suit I've got on now. I guess he planned it that way. Sly old fox, my Dad.

I want to be goody-goody for his sake, and to prove something to myself. So I revised and got books from the library. And end up with 69

uniform As. At first I think I've got someone else's results slip. And my best friends ain't believe it either. There's a party in afield out of town at the weekend, and none of my old mates can speak to me.

Seems I don't fit in with them any more, just because I made the effort. I don't get cross or upset, I just go home early.

A week later we try out what A levels feel like at a college open day. I should feel worse for being deserted, but in the first session I help the girl next to me pick apart an algebraic fraction. She's really embarrassed because it's six weeks since we took the exams and she knew it perfectly then. Her name's Adhiambo and we sit together at lunch.

There are a couple of boys to look at so I'm not paying attention in history. The tutor, Dr Rowe, struggles to make it sound relevant and says things to provoke a reaction. He thinks he's being friendly and cool but really he just picks on the quiet ones. Soon he's got the boffins arguing about elections and the effects of tactical voting. The rest of us try to hide. And then he asks if our political system is up to solving real problems. He reads from a newspaper bought just that morning about a famine in Africa, and then looks directly at me.

'It must be absolutely awful,' he says, but it's as if he finds it exciting.

'Yeah,' I say.

'So what would you do about it?'

And I don't even respond to him consciously.

3 September 2007

At the end of the day he was waiting, just as she knew that he

would. They took a mug each of the low-alcohol beer that was safer

than drinking the water, and found a dry log overlooking the savannah.

'You always know where to find me,' she said.

He said nothing. His shirtsleeves were rolled up past his elbows and his forearms were newly scrubbed clean.

She realised he'd spent the day in their makeshift hospital, healing those few that he could. They had both done more than was possible. Mary wondered if bringing her classmates out here might help somehow, but she'd probably get grounded by Dad.

She thought of him, back in the Lancashire drizzle. She thought of him with his head in his hands.

'We should be able to fix things like this,' she said. 'And not because we're special. People should just... not let it happen.'

The doctor hadn't touched his beer. 'The war doesn't make it easy. The relief can't get through, or is held up by gunmen who

then ransom the food that they steal.'

'Maybe if the army could protect the trucks...' began Mary, but the doctor shook his head.

'Then the convoy becomes more of a target.'

'But if they had guns they'd be treated better.'

The doctor sighed. 'Not better. More warily.'

Mary stretched her legs out in front of her, her shoes covered over with dirt and other people's blood. The doctor's cream and tan

golfing shoes were still immaculate, and yet he'd been the one in the operating theatre.

'Am I a gun?' she said.

The doctor's eyes twinkled. 'Yes,' he said.

‘And I’m dangerous.’

‘That’s not what your father believes. He saw you when you were a baby and said we’d got it wrong. That whatever you were built for, that wasn’t who you are.’

‘And he and Mum were allowed to adopt me?’

‘He always had a knack for disarming people. But it’s not always been very easy. I suppose all parents make –’ he winced at the word ‘– sacrifices.’

‘And the army doesn’t think I’m worth it, do they?’

‘They’re as concerned about you as the rest of us.’

‘Maybe it’s safer if they just melt me down.’

The doctor laughed. ‘You didn’t ask to be born, is that it?’

‘Well,’ she said. ‘What else can I do?’

He gazed out across the savannah, the same stark landscape from which mankind evolved. He himself had seen the tall, naked apes daring to brave open country and all the horror that nature could hurl at them. One man who never had a name decided to stop running from the lions and to defend himself with a sharp stick. A pity he’d got himself eaten.

‘Well?’ said Mary again.

‘What do you think we should do?’ he said.

Like when I was six I say, ‘Okay,’ and allow him to take me home.

Dad gives me a hug and pretends not to have been crying, and I tell him it’s time we fought back.

So now we're waiting in this corridor for his old bosses to see us.

Dad is still holding my hand and that means I know that he's

trembling. Cheers for that vote of confidence!

And I know what he's thinking as well. He won't ever tell me

himself, of course, but the people we're seeing have killed much lesser aliens just to be on the safe side. Okay, my record's not great. I don't even know what I can do yet and already people have died. I've tried 71

asking mock questions like I did far my exams and I know that they'll ask about Mum. Do I feel guilty or do I even remember? Am I a

danger to normal people? Why should they pay to protect me?

You can't really answer any of those, can you? And so Dad's

thinking we've walked into the lions' den. He's probably right.

I could run away if I wanted. Somewhere no one could ever find

me. Oh, the Doctor would come and he'd want to discuss it, but this isn't his choice to make. Time to stand up for myself at last. I have to do this, I have to face them. Whatever they decide.

I know what I am now, and what I can do. And that's why I'm

hoping they'll give me a job.

72

My Hero

Stuart Manning

An Adventure of a square, with the Fourth Doctor

It all began on a sunny morning at London Bridge. That was when I

first saw it. It was caught in a link in the wire fence alongside the platform, fluttering in the breeze.

I still don't know why I took it. It was just there, shining in the

light. It wasn't inviting or enticing, but it seemed like it had been waiting for me. I'm not quite sure how something can seem like it's

waiting, but this just did. So I put it in my pocket and rushed to get the train.

It was on the train, when I first saw him. I looked up from my Metro, out of the window, and there he was, desperately running along the platform by the train, with one arm outstretched. I half-smiled. I'd been there, wanting the train to wait a couple more seconds, then swearing as it pulled away regardless.

Hard luck, mate, I thought.

I didn't think for a minute that he was running after me.

'Yes, madam, thank you.' I stamped her paying-in book, and passed it back without making eye contact. People in London don't come into a bank to make friends. They want to be in and out as quickly as possible. Tanya in HR keeps reminding us to smile and be courteous, but I think it just scares people. 'Just be like me,' she trills in our Wednesday morning staff meetings. I don't think any sane person would like to be like her. She never stops smiling and is as fake as her teeth.

Now serving cashier number two.

I looked up. Next? Oh, no...

I frowned. Oh, God, it was him...

He sauntered forward with a throaty laugh. No! Please don't come to my window! Please don't come to my window! He was wearing a coat and scarf – in August. He'd probably stink, I decided. Long curly hair, mad eyes – either a down and out or 'eccentric', that word people always use as a euphemism for

‘drunk’ or ‘irritating’. He was grinning at me like a shark, so in this case it meant both.

‘Good morning,’ he beamed. Posh accent, bit pompous. Loud enough to like the sound of his own voice.

I looked down, hoping he wouldn’t recognise me as the smirking face from the train window. ‘How can I help you, sir?’

‘I think it’s more a case of how I can help you,’ he boomed, in what he probably thought was a whisper.

Oh, great, I thought. A comedian.

‘Do you have an account?’

‘The 8.23 to Cannon Street!’ He slapped his forehead and gestured at me dramatically.

Great. Just great. I pretended I hadn’t heard him. ‘There is a queue, sir.’

He leaned forward and lowered his voice. ‘You have to understand, you’re in grave danger.’

Oh, great. So he’s a nutter.

‘I’m the Doctor and I’m here to save you.’

Even better. A religious nutter.

‘Sir…’ I sighed. ‘Unless you’re here to make a deposit or something –’

‘A deposit? Of course I’m here to make a deposit!’ he shot back, rummaging around in his pockets.

I put my head in my hands, as he littered the counter ledge with bits of rubbish and debris from inside his long coat.

‘I should like to deposit this,’ he declared, throwing a handful of something mauve and steaming down onto the counter.

‘Wha... What is *that*?’ I stammered.

‘That’s a flallgon of Neff,’ he shot back, outraged. ‘What kind of bank is this? That’s one of the 12 galaxies’ most respected credit-exchange life forms, I’ll have you know.’

Whatever it was, it was making the veneer on the counter curl.

I gave him my most polite smile and casually reached underneath my desk to press the alarm button.

‘You know what I’m talking about,’ he glowered, as security led him away.

I suddenly felt very alone. I was scared, because I was beginning to think that I did.

And I did know. As I was walking back to the station that evening in the rain, I felt the thing burning in my pocket, and wondered if the other people in the ticket line could smell its sulphury smell. I just had this inkling that he’d be waiting.

I stopped at the red vending machine I usually passed and

decided on a Dairy Milk. Out of order.

It was then I heard the sound. Like an itching in the lining of my jacket, and the prickling of static against the material.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

I sensed my eyes widening. The sound was barely there, lost in the hubbub of the commuters, but I could sense it, steady and

rhythmic.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

I frowned and reached into my pocket. Sitting in my palm it

looked like nothing at all. Just the same simple grey plastic square it had been that morning. But now I could feel the energy bristling off it and the scratching of something inside. Something –

Suddenly the vending machine's lights blinked awake and it

began to rattle furiously. Chocolate bars spat out of its drawer and it rumbled angrily. At me. Yes, angry at me. I know that doesn't make

much sense, but it was. I felt the little scratching square burning in my palm and just knew that it and the machine were alive. Don't

ask me how – it was like some kind of sixth sense – a thing your

brain normally wouldn't register, but all of a sudden it had switched on like a light I couldn't move – it was just too much to process.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

With a brittle sound of plaster crumbling, the machine wrenched

itself free of the wall. I stepped back warily. It clattered forwards awkwardly in little bouncing steps, despite having no wheels or

legs.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

The scratching got louder... hungrier.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Oh, God...'

'Give that here!' his voice thundered. The grey square was

yanked out of my hand and the man with the scarf was standing

before me looking grim. He put a hand into his waistcoat and for a

second I flinched, thinking he was going to knife me. Instead, he

just produced an odd metal tube and began casually waving it over the square. Breathing heavily with the shock, I suddenly felt very silly and self-conscious.

'That... that machine was after me!' I stammered, justifying myself.

He looked up. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

'It was coming at me.'

'No,' he said in a deliberate, bored tone. 'It wanted this.' He held up the square. 'Or rather this wanted the machine.'

I wanted a drink.

'Look, please... Take it,' I begged.

He looked down at the little grey thing in his hand. 'It's a micro-sentient mechanical life form,' he explained, even though it didn't really explain anything. 'You should have left it alone,' he added sternly.

'Have it. Just leave me alone.'

He seemed too engrossed with his new find to listen. 'No place to go, no life to speak of, so it looked to find a mechanism. Hmmm? Didn't you?' he cooed, holding it to his face.

I felt a wave of irritation rise up inside me. 'It's a piece of plastic, not a puppy.'

He began to polish the square with his handkerchief. 'Ah, well to you it might be a piece of plastic, to your next-door neighbour it might be a piece of plastic, but it's a piece of plastic that doesn't want to be a piece of plastic any more.'

‘And that’s enough to send a sweet machine nuts?’

‘You work in a bank,’ he said. I just looked at him defeated. ‘And if you didn’t want to work in a bank any more you wouldn’t.’

‘And it’s that simple?’ I stammered.

‘Of course it’s not simple!’ he said, cradling the square protectively. ‘It’s a miracle. Not just anything can do this. Could you?’

I wanted to be back at work, playing solitaire on my PC. Before I could answer, though, the vending machine made a terrible dying sound, and belched out some oily smoke as its lights fizzed out

He threw back his head and laughed like a maniac.

The station was evacuated. The sight of smoke in the Underground was enough to bring everyone’s journeys to a standstill. Looking at the defeated commuters standing in the rain, I didn’t think anyone would see the funny side of a two-hour delay caused by a tramp, a pile of chocolate bars and a small grey square.

He was by the pavement alone, getting soaked, so I grudgingly offered him my umbrella. He leaned it against his shoulder. It was almost as if he hadn’t noticed the weather.

‘I need to get home,’ I began, wondering if I should give him a fiver or something. He nodded, looking ahead solemnly. ‘And, you’ll be okay with the thing?’

‘I shall find it somewhere nice to live.’

‘Rather you than me,’ I sighed.

He held it up gleefully. ‘But it liked you. Listen very carefully and you might hear it scratching sometime,’ he beamed.

I managed a weak smile. I never wanted to hear the scratching again. Already I could sense my brain putting up shutters and writing the day off as a manageable little headache. Somewhere

between a migraine and a hangover, I imagined.

‘Well, I must be off,’ he drawled, dropping the square into his pocket. ‘Places to go, plastic squares to take home…’

He rustled through his other pockets and produced a key. I’d not registered that he was standing next to a booth. A police box, the sign said… like the one at Earl’s Court, but a bit rubbish. It was beat-up and looked rather sad and useless in the rain.

‘Have fun in your cupboard.’ I smirked, as he unlocked the door.

‘Cupboard?’ he shouted. ‘You’ve just been attacked by a vending machine, found an alien in your pocket, and yet you can still look at a cupboard and think it’s a cupboard!’

‘All right, then, box?’

He looked less offended, and twirled the umbrella. ‘Just a box, I suppose?’

It felt like being back at school, being picked on by Mr Jolly to give some historical date that he knew I didn’t know. ‘So it’s not a box?’

He shook his head giddily and flashed a smile. I sighed. I didn’t want to hear about the box at all. I wanted an aspirin.

‘Take a look,’ he whispered.

The door inched open, and a slice of white light poured out,

cutting through the rain. I frowned as I took in the impossibility of it all. Something just wrong. Too wrong to even put into words. It's

like accepting that things in the world work a certain way, and then one day discovering that things fall up rather than down. It just

couldn't be.

'Clever, isn't it?' grinned the Doctor.

No, it wasn't, I thought. I felt something turning in my stomach,

like I was sinking down into the pavement. I felt small and lost and somehow he found it all fun.

I turned sharply, disgusted, and looked at the ground. The rain

was trickling down the gutter in sobbing gushes. I could feel the

water leaking into my left shoe.

Suddenly there was a sound. Wailing, maybe even painful, like a

groan. Like white noise or fingers down a blackboard – the kind of

sound your brain tries to block out because it's just wrong. A wrong sort of sound. For a wrong sort of box.

I turned around and it was gone. Like it hadn't been there. The

Doctor and his big, tatty, blue box of wrong were gone. I felt relief, knowing now that it hadn't been real. Until I looked down at the

ground where the thing had stood. A perfect square of dry pavement

looked back at me.

I realised then that he had my umbrella.

I stood in the rain, numb and freezing, only able to move once the

rain had made the square disappear. As it should.

It's easy to spend a lifetime wishing you could be someone else, but

the hard part is when you have to give that up and accept that you need to be yourself. Anyone can daydream about space and monsters and magic cupboards, but life's not like that. It's about stamping paying-in slips and Oyster cards and gas bills. Some nutter in a scarf might be able to pretend, but he doesn't have to worry about paying the rent. He can dream about moons and stars and monsters, because he doesn't work in a bank and eat ready meals.

Forestiere chicken in plastic tray and microwave mash tonight

Ding, and it's done. Three letters on the mat, identical junk-mail addressed to three past residents of the flat. I put them in a pile with the others. I go into my bedroom and close the door behind me.

TVs dark now. Wedge the chair underneath the door handle, as I've become used to, turn off the light and sit on the floorboards, arms wrapped around my knees, and wait.

Silence? That doesn't really exist if you listen hard enough.

I hear the *EastEnders*' theme bleeding through from next door. There's a cat wailing somewhere down the road, the sound of water rumbling through the plumbing as someone upstairs runs their bath, the hum of traffic in the night.

Yet I can still hear it. The scratching in the distance. Almost too quiet to hear, but it's always there. *Scratch, scratch, scratch*... the sound of broken fingernails scrabbling at the wood of the door. The monsters crawling up out of the floors to get me.

Scratch, scratch, scratch... endless and determined.

The monsters that he brought. The monsters that he left me to face. The terrible wild scratch, coming to swallow me up.

Scratch, scratch, scratch…

I claw at my temples, trying to blot the sound out, but still it comes, louder and louder.

Eventually I give in with a sigh and smile slightly. So much easier not to fight.

I feel the red well up in my eyes and see the Doctor's horrible grin once again.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

That horrible carefree grin.

You can run with a fantasy man in a silly scarf and let him solve all your problems, but it's not as simple as that. He can lark and joke and be heroic, but when he flits away, you're left with a heap of questions and no easy answers.

Was I meant to have learned something from him? To have been

inspired to greatness and untold heights of ingenuity? Probably. But my world isn't spacemen and aliens hiding in plastic squares. It's train journeys and clocking in and coping. So somehow I'll cope.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Just give in.

Scratch, scratch, scratch.

Thanks, Doctor.

My hero.

Plight of the Monkrah

John Davies

An Adventure of Gravkrom-Vey,

with the Fourth Donor and Oliver flay

Gravkrom-Vey sighed. Perhaps it was time to move on.

As always, he'd done his research. He'd consulted guidebooks, talked to his network and been on the intergalacticweb. Everyone, and every hit, had said this marketplace was ideal – a busy, thriving location. It should have been easy. Look earnest or pitiful, stop someone, anyone, explain the situation and get help: simple.

He tapped the metal lattice before him and vowed never to place his fate in the hands of others again. Especially those he knew solely through pixels or beeps. It may well have been a busy place. Once. Now, it was anything but

Two days had passed by. Two days with no resolution or progress. Two days where his only conversation had been with himself, which was never good. Of late, he didn't really know who he was any more. The mirror showed a face, but it wasn't his. On top of that the Monkrah was still trapped.

Staring at the contraption that had become his life, the late evening sun glinting off its chrome and silver plating, he started to drift. There were so many stories here in this market square, so many histories, but their silence was deafening. All he needed was someone to hear his story, to believe in him and help him in his

plight.

The plight of the Monkrah.

At first, he dismissed the sound but, as it continued, Gravkrom-Vey looked over to where a tall, blue box was appearing from nowhere. With a jarring thump, it was solid. A door opened inwards and light spilled out onto the dry earth. Two figures emerged, deep in conversation. One was wearing a long tweed coat with a large hat and even larger scarf. The other wore jeans, a polo shirt and a rather battered pair of trainers.

Reaching for his *I-spy Book of Alien Cultures*, Gravkrom-Vey flicked through the pages. Two legs, two arms, one head! Oh, ten

lovely fingers! And presumably ten wriggling toes! This was looking good. A sudden, strong scent caused him to pause. It was coming off the slightly shorter arrival. Gravkrom-Vey smiled, reading the entry he had found.

‘They proclaim themselves by masking themselves. It’s not a deliberate strategy, just a cultural thing – so don’t mention it! Strong, artificial chemical odours announce their arrival, often before you see them. They are smells that, when too strong, can catch in your throat/throats. They call this perfume, aftershave or deodorant. The most popular is Lynx, not to be confused with...’

Gravkrom-Vey waggled his eyebrow in celebration. Humans! Well, one of them. The taller one had no scent at all.

His excitement turned to concern as he saw them carry on

walking, heading towards the market's exit. Thinking quickly, Gravkrom-Vey flexed his tongue, cracking it like a whip.

The pair stopped abruptly, the taller of the two throwing them both to the ground.

'I'm sorry!' Gravkrom-Vey cried. 'I was only saying hello.'

The arrivals looked up, finally seeing him. The human looked momentarily bemused, but the taller one broke into the broadest grin Gravkrom-Vey had ever seen. In one swift bound he was on his feet, that scarf flapping behind him, pulling his companion up with him. Gravkrom-Vey pressed his left ear, causing it to extend.

'I knew I recognised that sound, Oliver. The Manicoll tongue-lash greeting. Well performed too. No accent, almost textbook. Despite initial appearances, we must be in the posh part of town.'

'Great, Doctor. Shame you didn't "recognise" it a little sooner. My knees hurt.'

Gravkrom-Vey made a mental note. So, the human was called Oliver; the other, Doctor.

'Oh, you're young – scabs and conkers,' Doctor said. 'You'll heal.'

Oliver was dusting himself down. 'Yeah, I guess you're right... Old-timer.'

'Ah, you're welcome,' Doctor said, ignoring the obvious jibe. Addressing Gravkrom-Vey, he grinned, waved his hat and bellowed, 'Hello, there!'

Gravkrom-Vey flinched, rapidly retracting his ear. Regaining his composure, he swallowed. ‘Can you help me?’

Doctor took several steps forward, Oliver in tow, his wide eyes staring intently. ‘Are you in trouble? Facing insurmountable odds?’

Gravkrom-Vey felt the weight of Doctor’s gaze and nodded.

Doctor grinned again, and Gravkrom-Vey smiled inwardly as he went on to say, ‘In that case, of course we can help you.’

81

‘That’s what we do, me and him,’ Oliver said. ‘We’re the Helpful Brothers. Like the Chuckle Brothers but without the panto.’ He pointed with one of his ten fingers. ‘That book of yours? We’ve probably helped most hr there at some stage.’

Doctor looked shocked. ‘Only probably?’ He addressed Gravkrom-Vey. ‘This is Oliver, by the way, and I’m –’

Gravkrom-Vey interrupted him. ‘Doctor. I know. I heard. I’m Gravkrom-Vey.’

Doctor looked momentarily affronted at being cut off, but the expression soon passed. ‘Gravkrom-Vey, eh? Sounds very important. May I?’ he asked, taking the *I-spy* book from GravIcrom-Vey’s grasp without waiting for a reply. Oliver pulled an ‘I’m sorry about him’ face.

Gravkrom-Vey shrugged. ‘Be my guest. As for my name, it’s just a... my name, it’s not important. However,’ he said, determined to start proceedings, ‘I am here on an important mission.’

To Gravkrom-Vey's chagrin, Doctor wasn't paying attention. He was fixated with the *I-spy* book. He turned a number of pages, stopped, flipped back and grinned. 'I knew it!' he exclaimed, pointing at a specific page. 'You're a Manicoll. Or, at least, a very close relation. There's something not quite...'

Thankfully, however, Oliver had been listening. He was tapping Doctor's shoulder, clearly excited. 'Help? Mission? Here we go again, Doctor. Another entry for your monster.com CV.'

A shrill whirring noise caught Gravkrom-Vey's attention. Doctor had noticed the machine. Excellent! Having placed the book into a coat pocket, Doctor was pointing a short, tubular instrument at the intricate device. 'Is this booby-trapped?'

Oliver gave Doctor a concerned look. 'That? There's a mission here and you're concerned with that?'

'Indeed I am,' Doctor affirmed, his tone evidently conveying a message of 'and that's the end of that', as Oliver fell silent. 'Well?'

Gravkrom-Vey shook his head, delighted the machine had caught attention so soon. 'It can give you a shock, but, no,' he said, galvanised, 'it is a trap, of sorts, though. It's trapping the Monkrah Fish.'

Doctor's eyes expanded to an alarming size. 'The Monkrah Fish!'

'Okay, I'll bite. What's a Monkrah Fish?' Oliver asked.

Doctor leaned closer to Oliver, cupping his mouth to his ear. Making no attempt to whisper, be said, 'I think it's a fish.' Turning back to Gravkrom-Vey, he continued, 'And it's trapped. Go on.'

Gravkrom-Vey felt his mouth dry, and his adrenalin start to rise.

This was it. This was his chance. Keeping his tone solid, measured and full of import, he said: 'The Monkrah is a powerful, omnipotent

creature. It can heal, or harm, at will. Once, it ruled our seas, but, alas, over time its numbers dwindled.'

Doctor looked intrigued, which was promising, but Gravkrom-Vey broke off, frowning as he saw Oliver suppress a laugh. 'And lo!' The human giggled. 'The peoples of Middle Earth did meet and elect a fellowship of protection...'

Doctor shushed him. 'Oliver!'

Oliver pulled another face, blushing slightly. 'Sorry, Doctor, I was just remembering a date with Chloe.'

Doctor shot Oliver a puzzled stare. 'Chloe?'

Oliver looked bemused, his expression reading 'here we go again'. 'Chloe,' he said patiently. 'Chloe, Chloe. The girlfriend I mention almost every day.'

'Oh, yes. Her.' Doctor turned back to Gravkrom-Vey, sharing a conspiratorial wink with him. Oliver was blushing again, clearly aware he'd just been teased. 'Actually, it is every day. He's such a bore, you know. So,' Doctor continued, ignoring Oliver's indignant yelp, bringing things back to the case in point. 'Monkrah. What happened, Graykrom-The White?'

Ignoring the change of his name, Gravkrom-Vey simply went for simplicity and said, 'Fishermen.'

Doctor let out a jubilant cry and beamed at Oliver. 'So, it is a

fish! I was right. Superb. As for fishermen.' He shrugged. 'That's evolution for you.'

'And local government,' Gravkrom-Vey added.

Doctor nodded sagely. 'Well, that's devolution for you.'

Gravkrom-Vey realised that his key audience clearly rested in Doctor. Maintaining the tone he had used earlier, he explained that war had been launched on the Monkrah Fish after a local politician had been poisoned. 'Poisoned?' Doctor asked. 'How?'

Oliver's voice cut in. 'With something toxic?'

Before Gravkrom-Vey could even react at Oliver's latest interjection, Doctor once again quietened him. However, a flicker of amusement passed between the pair. Add gravitas, Gravkrom-Vey, you need their help, you need them both to believe you.

The film. He'd forgotten the film. That usually helped.

'Perhaps this will explain, Doctor,' Gravkrom-Vey said solemnly. 'It tells the story, but be warned, it doesn't make for easy viewing.'

'So, it is *The Lord of the Rings*,' Oliver said, but Doctor's glance stopped him from adding anything else.

Gravkrom-Vey pressed a button on the desk, a monitor rising next to the metallic device. A screen flickered into life.

'A film?' Doctor asked, as excited as a child. Gravkrom-Vey nodded but then gaped as Doctor proceeded to produce two

extendable riding chairs from within his coat pockets. Thrusting them into the ground, he settled down on one and gestured for

Oliver to do the same on his. ‘Excellent. And it’s not even Saturday night. Is there popcorn?’

Gravkrom-Vey shook his head, still gaping.

Doctor smiled. ‘Never mind,’ he said, and removed his hat, upending it quickly. Within, Gravkrom-Vey saw freshly made popcorn. ‘Oliver and I have just been to the pictures and I hate waste. Oliver?’

‘Don’t mind if I do, Doctor,’ Oliver said, grabbing a handful of corn. ‘Gray? Run VT.’

Still taken aback at what had just played out in front of him, Gravkrom-Vey started the film. Who was in control of this? Him or them? At the moment, he wasn’t sure.

Doctor’s voice broke through his musing. ‘Ah! I like the start. Very Bergman.’

Images of a turbulent sea filled the screen, over which it read, ‘No actual Monkrah footage has been used in this programme.’ A voice started narrating.

We should have known better. This creature, so benign, so powerful, and yet still we ate it.

Doctor looked away from the screen, staring directly at Gravkrom-Vey. ‘I say. Is that your voiceover?’

Gravkrom-Vey quickly shook his head. He mentally kicked himself. Had he reacted too quickly?

‘Hmm,’ Doctor said, not betraying anything. ‘It must be the wording. It sounds like you, very Gravkrom-Vey-esque. It’s very

good, though. Very dramatic. I adore dramatic voiceovers.'

The screen now showed a restaurant, the word 'reconstruction' superimposed at the bottom. A large Manicoll was using its six limbs to order from a hologramatic menu.

One politician liked his Monkrah fish live. At first, all had been well, but as he swallowed it, he had made a comment about it needing seasoning.

Doctor nodded, enraptured by the dramatisation. 'Ah, the tact of a politician. You can always rely on that.'

However, as soon as the words left his mouth, he dropped dead.

The Manicoll on the screen flayed its limbs, choking loudly before falling off its chair.

Oliver suppressed a giggle, but Gravkrom-Vey saw that Doctor's attention never wavered. Excellent.

It seems that the devoured Monkrah had taken umbrage at his words and used its final moment to kill.

Oliver gave in and giggled. 'Did it have a sting in its tail?'

84

Gravkrom-Vey saw Doctor deliver a quick 'not now' glance. He was pleased when Oliver looked apologetic and turned back to the screen. Mob scenes were now being displayed.

War had been declared. Civil divide ripped us apart. Monkrah haters and Monkrah sympathisers took sides and extinction was in the air. Piscine carnage on an unprecedented scale took place. Within months the Monkrah were down to a dozen in number.

Doctor winced as the images of slaughtered fish flashed by and Gravkrom-Vey was delighted to see that Oliver was now transfixed

too. The next line should do it.

That's when we, the Manicoll, started to die.

Gravkrom-Vey absorbed the rapt silence that followed. A close-up of a weak-looking Manicoll filled the screen. As Doctor and Oliver watched, it died.

Skin cracked, eyeballs popped, hearts stopped beating. After several hundred had died in exactly the same way, the press noted a trend...

'And,' Oliver said, momentarily breaking the spell, 'with great originality, they called it "the Plague".'

Gravkrom-Vey scowled but let this latest interruption pass. The human was still watching the film. That was the main thing. Also, unlike his previous interruptions, this appeared more nervous and self-assuring.

Within days, families were stripped of generations. Scientists realised it was a lack of Monkrah oil in our diet that was killing us. It seemed the Monkrah had always wanted to help us; even in death bestowing goodness, aiding our immune system.

War then turned to preservation. Colonies were established, but the Monkrah refused to breed, so displeased were they with us. They started to eat one another, knowingly removing the cure.

Always a good judge of attention span, Gravkrom-Vey knew his audience had seen enough. He stopped the film.

'That's when *he* came,' he said, bringing attention back to himself as the monitor retracted into the desktop. 'He rescued the last one. Rescued it, but...'

Gravkrom-Vey tapped the metal device that separated him and Doctor. He explained that it was a machine, a lock, and one that was imprisoning the Monkrah.

Doctor gestured for Oliver to stand and he re-pocketed the chairs, ramming his hat back on his head without losing a single kernel of popcorn.

'This is all very, very, interesting, and hearts-rending,' he said in a tone that Gravkrom-Vey noted was as measured as his own, 'but I've never heard of the Monkrah. Ever.'

85

Gravkrom-Vey fought down a moment of panic and shrugged.

'Why should you have, Doctor? This is our suffering.'

Doctor stood still. He was more earnest, more resolute... more serious than Gravkrom-Vey had seen him. 'Because I've heard of you, the Manicoll. I've never met one, at least not until today, but I've heard of them. Of you. Friendly, noble, just there. You're almost an under-the-radar species, to be honest with you. Sorry. However, such a conflict, such suffering and so inter-linked, I would have heard of it. Inevitably.' Suddenly exasperated, Doctor turned away. 'Oh, just tell him, Oliver!'

Oliver was nodding, Doctor's sudden mood swing clearly nothing new to him. 'That's true. He would have,' he said matter-of-factly.

His annoyance with this Doctor's sudden arrogance merging with him feeling his hold slipping, Gravkrom-Vey thought fast.

Improvise, man, improvise and deflect.

'Yes! That's what *he* said.'

Doctor swung back, now grinning, his outburst seemingly forgotten. “Ah, we’re back to “he”! What was “he”? Human? Kandalingan? Time Lord?’

‘Who knows? He said that he identified with being the last of his race, saw the Monkrah’s plight from space and came here. He was a biped, like you, that’s all that is known. As you can see, I am not and as such cannot handle the key. None of us can. He taunted us for our foolishness.’

‘The key?’ Doctor asked.

Gravkrom-Vey realised that just one word had brought Doctor back. He indicated the long, metal rod next to the lock.

Oliver laughed, looking at the metallic structure. ‘Oh, this is some story!’

Gravkrom-Vey flushed, hoping he wasn’t about to go through another outburst. ‘Do you not believe me?’

Oliver shrugged. ‘Travelling with him, I believe anything. Well, almost. I’m still not buying the face-changing thing, to be honest. Anyway, go on. Your cure is locked in a prison that only someone like us two can open. Am I right so far?’

‘Yes.’

‘But this is just a...’

Gravkrom-Vey felt a cold bead of sweat trickle under his hairline. The human was still not totally convinced.

Doctor addressed Oliver. ‘How many times have I told you?

What to you is a sandwich is a ten-star hotel to a Sprank.'

'Yeah, but it's still a sandwich,' Oliver stated.

'Hmm, that's as maybe.' Turning away from Oliver, Doctor said, 'Anyway, Gravkrom-Vey, this lock...'

86

Gravkrom-Vey leapt on Doctor's words, drawing the conversation back to the machine, and to him. 'It has defeated many a biped, Doctor. Some left claiming it to be impossible.'

Doctor raised one eyebrow. 'Nothing is impossible,' he said. 'As I said earlier, we've just been to the cinema. We saw a remake that was actually better than the original and I always thought that was an impossibility. Well, The Bride of Frankenstein aside. Ah, the Bride! Marvellous woman. Don't you think so, Oliver? So statuesque.'

Oliver shrugged. 'Guess so. Not much of a talker, though. Not that that's a bad thing. And she had even bigger hair than you! Oh, and, anyway, that wasn't.'

'Wasn't what?' Doctor asked.

'A remake,' Oliver explained. 'Bride was a sequel.'

Agitated, Gravkrom-Vey frowned. Were these two always like this? Did they ever stay focused on one thing? For now, his thing? Didn't they understand what was at stake here?

Rather louder than intended, he asked, 'Does that mean you'll help release the Monkrah?'

Doctor nodded, his eyes shining, the curls in his hair bouncing.

Oliver lightly touched Gravkrom-Vey on the shoulder, smiling warmly. ‘It was never in doubt, mate.’

GravIcrom-Vey felt his mouth drying up again. ‘Really?’ he asked. “Since when?’

‘Ever since you said you were in trouble,’ Oliver announced.

Gravkrom-Vey closed his eyes, counting down from ten slowly and calmly in his head. They’d believed him since then? They’d allowed him to go on, made him show the film and all the time they’d been willing to help from that first exchange? Of all the…

Hang on, the important thing is they were going to help.

Refocusing, he hopped from one foot to the other, and then the other. ‘Oh, thank you, Doctor! Thank you, thank you for the sake of all my people.’

Doctor stopped nodding, and his curls became still. ‘Oh, no. Don’t thank me. Oliver’s going to do all the hard work.’

Gravkrom-Vey saw Oliver blanch. ‘I am?’

Doctor took the *I-spy* book from his pocket. ‘Indeed. You’re a biped, aren’t you?’

Oliver pointed at Doctor. ‘Yeah, but so are you.’

Doctor turned a page. ‘I’m biped plus. And before you ask – no, you can’t use the sonic screwdriver.’

As Doctor resumed reading, Oliver picked up the lock, testing its weight. ‘Okay, fair play. I’m a Brummie. Nothing fazes a Brummie. So, all I have to do is…’

‘Slide it in place, yes,’ Gravkrom-Vey said. ‘You have three unlocking phases, a rest, for want of a better word, at the end of each, indicated by the black hoops attached.’

‘Okay,’ Oliver said, taking a deep breath. ‘Here goes.’

The human bit down on his lower lip, lifting the key into its starting bay. His eyes were fixed, determination and hope shining through. Gravkrom-Vey felt a party start in his head. They were doing it! They were helping him. Oh, wonderful, wonderful!

Moments passed as Oliver focused on the complex looped array before him, holding the key steady as he worked.

‘Oh, come on, man!’ Doctor boomed, causing both Gravkrom-Vey and Oliver to flinch. ‘The Ancient Snood could have done that by now and they’ve been dead for centuries.’

Gravkrom-Vey saw Oliver pause, his hand, thankfully, remaining steady. He was smiling, clearly glad of the break in his task. ‘The Ancient Snood? You’ve just made them up.’

‘No, I haven’t,’ Doctor said, tapping a page in the *I-Spy* book.

‘An ancient, oh, that’s been established, hasn’t it? Yes, an old, now extinct... I’ve intimated that, as well, haven’t I? Okay, to put it simply, a race of ... well, moles...’

Oliver chuckled. ‘You’re saying that a dead race... of blind people, sorry, creatures would be better at this than me?’

‘They weren’t blind.’

Gravkrom-Vey gasped as he saw Oliver’s hand slip. He’d clearly

become distracted by his exchange with Doctor. ‘My friend! Be careful!’

Oliver started, and immediately turned back to the device, halting the decent of his hand. He smiled. ‘Thanks, Gandalf. You’re a mate.’

Gravkrom-Vey blushed. ‘I cannot be. You’re a human, a male, and I’m...’

Oliver laughed a real, full bellied laugh while still keeping his composure. ‘Friend, Gandalf. Friend. Not that kind of “mate”. I’m not that modern.’

Looking back at Doctor, Gravkrom-Vey saw that he appeared not to have noticed Oliver’s lapse in concentration. He was lost in the book again, commenting as he read. ‘Oh, Stanhype VII. National sport – being patronising. Government-sponsored. Interesting. Personally, I prefer Stanhype VIII. There, it’s sarcasm.’

‘Perhaps we should go there next, Doctor. Travelling with you, I often feel the need for brushing up on the old sarcasm. I get rusty with the lack of practice.’

Doctor looked up from the book, closing it. ‘Really?’

‘No, not at all. I was being sarcastic, Doctor.’

Doctor snorted, reopening the book in a fit of pique, cracking the spine. ‘So,’ he said, his eyes focused on the book, ‘how is phase one going?’

Oliver carried on working. ‘Well, despite the interruptions, okay.’

‘Good, good,’ Doctor said, reading away. ‘Just remember... all those things I told you about Einstein’s Theory of Relativity and Newton’s Third Law...’

‘Yes?’ Oliver asked when Doctor’s voice trailed off.

‘Forget them,’ Doctor said, turning a page. ‘They only apply on Earth.’

‘Oh, yeah. Cheers,’ Oliver said, successfully moving the key along a tricky part of the metal pathway.

Gravkrom-Vey followed the intricate way Oliver dealt with the equipment, admiration swelling for them both. Sometimes, he really disliked himself for living the life he did. Ah, well, this was the life he’d chosen and it paid a living. Or would do. Of sorts. lust as long as these two didn’t suspect anything. These two. Here he was undergoing his trial, and yet they were also undergoing a trial themselves. For him. For the Monkrah. And they were treating it in such a relaxed manner. What characters they were, what interplay, what resolve...

Gravkrom-Vey was brought back into the here and now with the now familiar booming tones of Doctor. ‘Oh, well done, that man! Bravo!’ Gravkrom-Vey looked at the lock. He’d done it. Oliver had completed phase one.

He still believed in the quest!

Gravkrom-Vey grinned. ‘Well, done, Oliver. You should take a rest. Shake your arms... Get the circulation back. My people will thank you if you are successful.’

Oliver smiled. ‘Thanks, Gandalf. Doctor? You never really said why you wanted me to do this? Any reason? I never really bought biped plus.’ Once again, they broke away from the seriousness, reforming their bond. Gravkrom-Vey listened, despite his desire for Oliver to continue with the task.

Doctor shook his head, staring mournfully at the savage crease in his book’s spine. ‘No, none at all. I just fancied a day off.’

‘A day off? You? Surely not!’ Oliver shook his head, adding, ‘That’s like Davina missing an eviction-night interview.’

Gravkrom-Vey stared, bemused, but still impressed, at the levels this pair operated on.

‘Anyway, to actually answer your question, which I don’t often do, admittedly, I won’t be around forever, you know. Nor you.’

Oliver looked crestfallen. Noticing this expression, Doctor added, solemnly, ‘All my friends leave eventually. You need to grow,

Oliver. You’ll go back to Chloe a new man, one day. The same, but improved. Oliver plus, if you like.’ He broke off, a new train of thought showing in his eyes, his tone now far removed from that he had used only seconds before, slow at first but building in tone and fervour. ‘Then again, if I crossed my time stream often enough I could create a paradox to make it appear as though I were always around, not just for you but for the cosmos. However, if I did that, I would be, wouldn’t I? It wouldn’t be a paradox at all. When is a paradox not a paradox?’

Gravkrom-Vey realised he hadn't blinked for ages, so enraptured was he by this exchange, so he did. A lot. 'When it's a linear singularity with no possible divergence,' he suggested, without thinking.

'Oh, that's very good! Very good, Gravkrom-Vey.' Doctor paused, looking him directly in the eye. Gravkrom-Vey once again felt the weight of that stare and gulped. 'Especially for a Manicoll,' Doctor said, breaking the eye contact. 'Personally, I have no idea! Oliver? Jelly baby?'

Gravkrom-Vey saw Doctor produce a white bag from his pocket and offer it to Oliver. Oliver, in the space of seconds, had gone from distraught to confused, to bemused, to resigned. Smiling, he ruffled his hair and took a small, bright green object from within and placed it in his mouth.

'Thanks, Doctor,' Oliver said between chews. 'The sweet you can eat between freeing Monkrah without ruining your appetite, eh? Am I doing okay, by the way?'

Doctor shook his head. 'No. You're doing magnificently!'

Turning to Gravkrom-Vey, his face solemn, he said, 'I would offer you one of these, but I'm afraid I can't.'

'Why?' Gravkrom-Vey asked, immediately wishing he hadn't. He should already know the answer.

'Well, you are a Manicoll, aren't you?'

Gravkrom-Vey nodded quickly and then pursed his lips. Again, had he been too quick?

‘Yes, well. You see. Jelly babies, gelatin. Toxic to the, er,

Manicoll. Terminally. If you, as a Manicoll, ate this...’ He paused, his hand first clenched and then flayed outward. ‘Boom!’

Gravkrom-Vey cursed under his breath. He needed food. Until

that moment he hadn’t realised that he hadn’t eaten all day.

Actually, two. That overpriced burger on the train here had been his last ‘meal’. Ah, well, needs must and all that. He swallowed

anyway, both through imagining the taste of the sweet and being

alarmed by the graphic allusion to his death. ‘Thank you for your

kindness, Doctor.’

90

Oliver broke his reverie. The human was staring at the lock again.

‘This looks a bit tricky, you know. I’ve had less trouble getting to the Bullring. However, I’ll give it my best shot.’

‘Best shot?’ said Doctor. ‘You do realise that this whole

operation depends entirely on you, Oliver?’

Gravkrom-Vey leaned forward involuntarily. No, both of you.

Both! I need you both!

‘I do, Doctor. I won’t let you, the Manicoll, the Monkrah or

Gandalf here down.’

As Gravkrom-Vey watched, Oliver leaned into the contraption

again. His elbows were bent; his hand was quivering in evident fear

of making a wrong connection.

‘Doctor?’ Oliver asked, having lifted the lock from its safe base,

sweat now starting to show. ‘Are you sure we can’t use the sonic

screwdriver?’

‘We?’ Doctor closed his book again, giving the spine an apologetic glance. ‘Since when do “we” use the sonic screwdriver?’

Oliver bit down on his bottom lip again. ‘Are you always so pedant – Yes, yes, you are. And I thought Chloe could split hairs.’

‘What?’ Doctor looked intrigued. ‘She, like the screwdriver, uses ultra sonic sound waves to resonate, disturb and fracture the known laws of biological physics? Sometimes to beneficial, often to devastating effect?’ Gravkrom-Vey frowned, not fully understanding what Doctor meant. However, Oliver clearly did.

‘If that’s Time Lord for “female intuition and logic”, then yes.’

Doctor grinned that wide grin of his. ‘I really most meet her one day.’

‘Maybe you will,’ Oliver said. ‘If I ever complete phases two and three.’

‘Oh, you will, you will,’ Doctor said reassuringly. ‘I have faith.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes,’ Doctor said. ‘An excellent album.’

‘Tell me,’ Oliver said, still concentrating. ‘Does Stanhype IX have punning as a sport?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘Just a guess’

Gravkrom-Vey looked at Oliver. The lock’s wire was in serious danger of getting tangled.

Doctor pointed dramatically at the device. ‘ *Oliver!* ’

Oliver jolted. Immediately, he spotted the problem. He straightened the link. Gravkrom-Vey sighed, in relief. They were still in reach of opening the lock. And both clearly wanted to. Superb!

‘I’m sorry, Doctor,’ Oliver said apologetically. ‘I’m not too good

at multi-tasking.’

‘Yes, talking, thinking and acting. Tricky stuff,’ Doctor paused. ‘Wouldn’t you agree, Gravkrom-Vey?’ Without waiting for a reply, Doctor carried, on. ‘Oliver, one false move here and...’

‘Snap, frazzle and pop. I know, I know,’ Oliver said, slightly flustered.

‘Sorry, Grav. Phase two is almost complete. Just another twitch about... now! Yes! Phew.’

Gravkrom-Vey smiled as Oliver rested the key at the safe point and put Doctor’s last direct stare out of his mind. He’d done it! He’d completed phase two. This Oliver was good! He watched as Oliver interlaced his fingers, clenching and unclenching them to get some feeling back.

Gravkrom-Vey edged a little closer to Doctor, who was offering words of encouragement. Words that, hopefully, would fuel the human’s desire to win, to fit the lock, to believe to the end.

‘Okay, phase three, when you’re ready. I won’t put you off, Oliver.’

‘Thank you, Doctor,’ Oliver said, taking a deep breath. Then

another. And another. He set to work with careful, delicate movements, the smoothest of touch, and the most intense look of concentration.

Doctor leaned in closer, chewing on a jelly baby. ‘I promise. I won’t break your concentration.’

‘Yes, you said,’ Oliver said, once again biting down on his bottom lip. ‘Thank you.’

‘You won’t even know I’m here,’ Doctor said. ‘I mean I’ll be here, obviously, but your senses won’t notice.’

Oliver bristled. ‘Indeed. Take away your booming voice, the smell of jelly babies and the fact that you’re now a millimetre away from my ear, I’d swear you were miles away.’

Doctor slapped Oliver on the shoulder, backing away. ‘Good man! Oh, did I knock you?’

‘Only to the point where I nearly hit a live spot, Doctor, yes, but don’t worry.’

‘Good, good. I’d hate to think I nearly ruined everything. The Monkrah fish...’

Gravkrom-Vey nodded. Yes, Doctor. Remember the Monkrah.

‘Look, I know, Doctor. This isn’t daytime TV. No need for the reminders. Now, please, can we imagine we’re on Stanhype X where the sport is silence?’

When Doctor didn’t reply, Oliver looked behind him.

Doctor pointed at his lips, which were clamped tight.

‘You were imagining,’ Oliver observed.

Doctor nodded and winked at Gravkrom-Vey. Instinctively, he winked back.

Oliver smiled and went back to his task, his own outburst as easily forgotten as Doctor's earlier one.

Gravkrom-Vey watched intently. This pair were fascinating. Even in the midst of this mission, they were calm, relaxed and in control. A great skill. One he could do with learning himself.

A sudden, dull pain made Gravkrom-Vey realise he had accidentally knocked the base of the counter. The noise and disturbance caught Oliver unawares. His hand fell sharply, the key slid...

An ear-piercing alarm sounded just as a series of random lights arced above the machine. Green, yellow, red, blue and orange flared and dazzled in rapid succession, musing them all to squint.

'I know, Doctor, I know!' Oliver looked crestfallen. 'I'm sorry!'

Although Gravkrom-Vey knew why Doctor was smiling again, Oliver looked perplexed. 'Why apologise, Oliver? You've won!'

Confused, Oliver looked first at Doctor and then at Gravkrom-Vey. 'Won?'

Gravkrom-Vey laughed. 'Indeed. And so have I. Congratulations. You traversed the metal piping of the lock without touching it.'

Doctor swung to look at Gravkrom-Vey. 'You've won?'

However, just as Gravkrom-Vey started to panic, Oliver came to his

rescue.

‘Hang about. This really wasn’t a lock at all, was it? It was always what it looked like: a stupid game!’

Gravkrom-Vey instinctively knew Doctor was looking at him and caught his eye. ‘Can I have that jelly baby after all, Doctor?’

Doctor nodded and placed one sweet into Gravkrom-Vey’s mouth. ‘Doctor! What are you doing?’ Oliver exclaimed, panic in his voice. ‘He can’t eat that! He’s a Manicoll!’

‘Is he?’ Doctor asked quietly. ‘When is a Manicoll not a Manicoll?’

‘Eh?’ Oliver was confused. Again.

‘When,’ Doctor concluded, ‘he’s Gravkrom-Vey.’

Gravkrom-Vey was about to say something but part of the sweet lodged at the back of his throat. He coughed in an attempt to shift the jelly baby, saliva running down his chin.

Oliver pointed. ‘Doctor, his chin! It’s blistering!’

The jelly baby now gone, Gravkrom-Vey was amused at the horrified expression on Oliver’s face, He felt his skin, his outer skin tingle, the layer bubbling, expanding… detaching.

He flexed his limbs. With one final, huge inflation his outer layer dissolved.

93

Oliver stared, incredulous at what had just happened, although realisation was dawning. ‘You’re a biped… humanoid. And… you’re ginger!’

Gravkrom-Vey nodded. He carefully detached the artificial hydraulic tongue from his own and sidestepped a number of fallen, liquefied limbs. ‘How long have you known, Doctor?’ Gravkrom-Vey asked, peeling the strip of Velcro from his forehead.

‘Ah, using your real voice now too, I see. I knew that was your voiceover. Well, your knowledge of singularity confirmed it, but ever since I saw that eyebrow. The Manicoll have two, it just looks like one to an untrained eye. That and the poorly applied make-up. Given the zap, though, I assume it has extract of real Manicoll in there. A tad macabre, I have to say. You’re quite a showman, though. I nearly believed in the Monkrah fish.’

‘Why thank you, Doctor.’

‘It can’t be easy, though, living life as two different people, especially cross species. What’s it all in aid of?’

Gravkrom-Vey took the jelly baby that Doctor was offering. ‘It’s all for my acting diploma; creating, believing and propagating a fiction. I had to portray a freedom fighter. Of sorts. And, yes, it can indeed get confusing when lost in the role. The mirror gets perplexing. But it’s a skill I need to master.’

Oliver pointed at where the screen had risen from the desk. ‘Hang on. So that large Manicoll in the restaurant…’

‘Was me, yes. I had access to the film department I had to be quick, though. The lights went off at ten. Stage two was learning to adapt my fiction, testing how convincing it could be to different cultures with just this set prop, or game as you called it, Oliver. My hook, if you pardon the pun, was the fish. Monkrah here, Sprinkle-

Drinkle there, and on one certain little planet...!

Gravkrom-Vey reached beneath the table counter and lifted a clear, water-filled plastic bag. He chuckled as he saw Oliver stare slack-jawed at the tiny creature within. In clockwork and anti-clockwise circles, it flapped its fins, darting around its small enclosure.

'It's... a goldfish! You're a student and that's... a goldfish!'

Gravkrom-Vey winked. 'Or a sandwich, eh, Doctor?'

'Touché. And stage three?' asked Doctor.

'To get sponsors. I need signatures, eight, to graduate.'

Gravkrom-Vey produced his report card and offered it to Doctor.

'So,' Doctor said, 'if Oliver and I sign this to say we found this whole charade convincing – which we did, you're very good. Very, very good...'

'I'd need just one more signature to graduate, yes.'

'Well,' Doctor said, rummaging for a pen, 'who are we to stand in the way of the next Olivier, or maybe the next Paris Hilton?' He paused in his search. 'Ah! Now there was a woman. Very statuesque. And a talker. I remember her Oscar acceptance speech...'

'Doctor!' Oliver said, bringing him back to the moment.

'Ah, yes,' Doctor said, a thought clearly just occurring to him, 'Gravkrom-Vey, or just Gravkrom as it says on this card, can you

handle constructive criticism?'

Gravkrom nodded. 'Of course, Doctor. It's from that that we thrive and grow.'

Doctor smiled. 'I'd advise you drop the "he" part in your act. It does alert the eager mind to look deeper. Oh, and get a better stage name. Perhaps a title. Like "The Doctor", but not that – it's mine.'

'The Doctor?' Gravkrom-Vey asked. 'I thought it was just Doctor?'

Oliver shook his head. 'Er, no. He's very definite about the definite.'

Gravkrom-Vey shrugged. 'Fair enough. Anything else?'

'Probably,' the Doctor said. 'There's always just one more thing. However, I just can't think of it at the moment. Aha! Pen!'

The Doctor produced a pen, signed the report card with a flourish and passed it to Oliver. Once signed, Gravkrom thanked them both and put his report card away.

Looking thoughtful, the Doctor asked, 'Hmm... Just one more signature?'

Gravkrom nodded.

'And from that, autographs! Oliver, help him pack up the stall. He's coming with us. I think I know just the race he needs to convince to get that final signature.'

The Doctor's eyes were shining, which unnerved Gravkrom. 'Er, there's really no need...'

The Doctor breezed past him, assuring him there was every need.

With a dramatic flourish, he moved the metal hook back to the start of the buzz wire game without touching the metal once, flicking it off. ‘Anyway, it’s only a short trip.’

‘Where and who did you have in mind, Doctor?’ Oliver inquired.

Gravkrom watched as Oliver characteristically struggled to hide a fit of giggles when the Doctor whispered something in his ear. For the first time since he had met him, the Doctor actually succeeded in keeping the whisper a whisper.

Within minutes, the Doctor and Oliver had dismantled his stall, arranged it into cartable sections, and taken him over to the blue box.

‘Now,’ Oliver said, ‘Be prepared for a shock. The TARDIS...’

‘Bigger on the inside?’

Oliver paused, mid-step. ‘How did you know that?’

Gravkrom lifted the *I-spy* book from the Doctor’s pocket, tapping it against his head.

Oliver laughed. ‘Clever dick.’

Gravkrom winked. ‘No. Research.’

The journey over, and make-up reapplied, Gravkrom stepped out of the TARDIS. Immediately, the sound of three whip-like cracks caught his attention, forcing him to turn to the source of the noise. Six-limbed, green and above-the-radar Manicoll. Real Manicoll. Gravkrom gulped, hearing the Doctor and Oliver laughing from the doorway behind him.

He glanced back, seeing them and beyond them Oliver's goldfish swimming around inside the TARDIS's time rotor.

After a deep breath, and a shared wink, he stepped forward, flexing his tongue.

Something told him he was about to deliver the performance of his life.

96

Remain in Light

Eddie Robson

An Adventure of Anton Hellinger,

with the Eighth Doctor and Lucie Miller

When I look out of the window and see the thing out on the beach my first instinct is to ask 'How long has that been there?' but there's nobody to ask because Justine has already gone home. It's only 9.30 but she had to make a token appearance at some family thing, or so she said. My second instinct is to go out and take a look at it, so I stride out of the beach house and over to the thing, about fifty feet away from the house. I thought it was some kind of big black fish but actually it's something wrapped in rubber or plastic or something. I find a stick on the shore, pick it up and poke the thing a couple of times.

Nothing happens.

Above the sound of the waves and the wind I hear the phone ringing in the beach house. At first I think I've got no business answering the phone because it isn't my house, but then it occurs to me that maybe that Cameron guy is calling, or maybe it's somebody calling from a good party, or someone calling to see if they can use the beach house for a good party. I step back to the house, and

although I take my time I don't miss the call. I pick up the phone.

'Hi,' I say, turning the volume down on the stereo but not too much because my favourite Go-Gos' song is playing.

'Hello?' says a voice from the other end, a British guy. 'Is Alison there?'

'Who's Alison?' I ask. 'Is she a friend of Cameron's?'

'I don't know. Who's Cameron?'

'This is his house.'

'I do have the right number, don't I?' He sounds tense as he reads the digits to me.

'Yeah, I think so.'

'A house on Paradise Cove, Zuma Beach, Malibu, Los Angeles County?'

'... California, the United States of America, Earth, the Solar

System. Yeah.'

'And has something just washed up on the beach?'

'Yeah.' I look around, wonder if this is a joke. But then, how would they – 'Wait, who is this?'

'I'm the Doctor,' he says. 'And if Alison isn't there, I need you to do something for me.'

'Whoa, whoa, whoa –'

'Please, it's important. I thought that someone I trusted would be there to do this, but evidently they aren't. So I need you to be someone I can trust. What's your name?'

‘Anton.’

‘Anton, please do as I ask.’

I guess I’m not doing anything else. ‘What do you need me to do?’

Bring the thing in from the beach. Is there anybody who can help you?’

‘No.’

‘I’m sorry, it’s quite heavy.’

‘That’s okay. I work out.’

‘Please be careful with it, it’s a little bit fragile.’

I put the receiver on the side and walk back to the thing on the beach. After a few seconds’ examination I realise that it has two handles at either end. I choose an end, pick it up and, walking backwards, drag it towards the house. It is pretty heavy but it slides easily along the wet sand and onto the carpet of the beach house. I hope Cameron won’t be mad if it leaves a stain. I pick up the phone again and say, ‘Okay, now what?’

‘That was quick. Is there a sharp knife in the house? A kitchen knife will do.’

I go to the kitchen, find one and come back.

‘Slice the bag open. Be very careful not to cut her.’

‘Her?’

‘Please –’

‘Is there somebody in this thing? Why didn’t you tell me that before?’

‘Because I knew you’d ask questions. Please, just open the bag.

Carefully.'

The material isn't tightly wrapped around the contents, so I pull the slack clear and push the knife through from one side to the other. I then carefully slide it along, opening up a slit large enough for my hands to grip. I remove the knife, put it aside and pull at the slit. The material is tough, but it tears at the weak spots and falls aside to reveal a girl inside, maybe twenty or 22 years old. She is slim, kind of short, and blonde, with a kind of insolent expression. She wears a red short-sleeved shirt and jeans. Her skin is pale. She isn't breathing. It

suddenly hits me that I am alone with a dead body, and I grab the

telephone.

'What is this?' I ask.

'Not what, who. She's my friend. Her name's Lucie.'

'She's dead.'

'No, she isn't. Well, technically perhaps, but I've never been big on technicalities. There's a package tied to her wrist. Take it off and unwrap it.'

I do so. Inside is what looks like an insulin kit, containing

something like a gun with a nozzle on the end. There are also two

transparent capsules, one of which has a big '1' written on the side in magic marker; the other has a '2'.

'Take capsule number one,' says the guy on the phone. 'There's a

space in the back of the applicator where you put them in. Push it

until it clicks, then hold it to her skin and pull the trigger.'

I do what he says, although at some point in the last few minutes

my hands have started to shake and this makes it difficult. 'Okay,

done it. Now what?'

'Wait a moment'

I do, but it's almost unbearable.

'Can you see any movement?'

I look down at the girl. 'No, I can't see any movement. She's...

dead.'

'It won't be anything big – just a twitch. Look at her eyes.'

I watch them. I think I see a flicker under the lids, and say so.

'You think?' says the Doctor.

'Yeah. No, I can definitely see something.'

'Good. Eject the first capsule and give her the other one.'

I fit the second capsule in position and give her another shot, with a little more confidence this time, then return to the telephone. 'So

what's this one –'

The girl's eyes snap open and she takes a sharp, urgent breath. I

jump back. She rolls over onto her side, then coughs unpleasantly.

'Oh, thank heaven for that,' says the Doctor.

'Was that what was supposed to happen?' I ask.

'Yes. She should be fine. Thank you.'

The girl, exhausted from coughing, looks up at me. 'Is that him

you're talking to?' She's British too.

'Who?' I ask.

'The Doctor.'

'Uh... yeah.'

'Give it here.' She grabs the receiver from me. I notice for the first time that the record has finished and this thankfully gives me the

opportunity to do something normal and stress-free. I stand up and I

go and choose another record to play while she talks to him.

'That was *rank*,' she says. 'Was that really the only way to get me out of there?' Pause while he talks. 'My mouth tastes of... sawdust. Is that normal?' Pause. 'Oh. So did you sort them out?' Pause. 'Get in!

So is this your mate?' Pause. 'You *what*? I thought you were sending me to quote "An old and trusted friend" unquote? So who's this

bloke?'

I pull Duran Duran's *Seven and the Ragged Tiger* from its sleeve and put it on the turntable and pretend not to be listening to what

Lucie's saying. 'And how the hell could you possibly know I'd be

okay with him?' she says. 'He could've been anybody!' Pause, during

which she looks me up and down. 'Yeah, I know you didn't have a lot

of options. But still. I can't believe you sometimes. So when are you coming to meet me?' Pause. 'Fantastic,' she says sarcastically. 'And what am I meant to do till then? Where am I meant to *sleep*?' Pause.

'We'll have words about this later. I'll see you Saturday.' She puts the phone down and coughs again. When she's done, she looks around,

does a double take when her eyes reach the Christmas tree, and turns to me. 'Is it Christmas?' she asks.

'Yes,' I say.

'Blimey. I had no idea... So did you bring me in and give me the

shots?'

'Uh... yeah,' I say.

'Thanks,' she says. 'I... er... appreciate you bringing me back to life and stuff. But don't try anything funny.'

'I wasn't gonna.'

'Good.'

'My name's Anton.'

‘Bully for you. I’m Lucie.’ She stretches her limbs, winces and examines her arm. ‘Ow,’ she says, touching it gingerly. I realise that this is probably the spot where I poked the bag with the stick. She sniffs her shirt and grimaces. ‘Ugh. God, I stink. Is there a shower here?’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘Upstairs.’

‘Cheers.’ She climbs to her feet and walks into the hall. ‘If I catch you peeking at me I’ll kick your head in,’ she says without turning around.

I stand and walk to the doorway. ‘Hey,’ I say as she walks slowly up the stairs, ‘Do you want me to get out of your hair for like an hour or something? I might be able to find you some other clothes and pick up some food if you’re hungry...’

She stops at the top step and turns. ‘Actually, yeah. I could murder a burger.’

* * *

100

When I return to the house around an hour later, *Love Action* by The Human League is playing loudly and I find Lucie dancing around the living room to it. The music is so loud she doesn’t hear me and she looks embarrassed when I tap her on the shoulder, but then she laughs and turns the volume down. I hold up a bag from Big Kahuna Burger and she rubs her hands together. She sits down on the sofa and I sit in the recliner and we eat in front of MTV.

‘How’s your burger?’ I ask.

‘Mmm,’ she says with her mouth full. ‘Tasty.’

Once she’s eaten the food she goes upstairs to change into the

clothes I borrowed from my sister and puts her own clothes in the washing machine. Lucie says the borrowed clothes don't quite fit and I say we can go and buy more tomorrow if she wants. She says she only has twenty dollars and I say it doesn't matter. She seems more relaxed than when she first woke up, which is understandable I guess.

'Sorry if I was a bit harsh,' she says. 'It's just, y'know, I don't know you and I was in a bit of a vulnerable position back there.'

'That's okay,' I say. 'It'll be okay for you to stay here, by the way. I'm borrowing the house from a friend of a friend. I checked, he's not gonna be back in town until Sunday.'

She asks questions about me. I tell her about college and how weird it is to be back in LA and staying with my parents after four months at Bennington, and how different the East Coast is. I ask her what she was doing that resulted in her washing up, technically dead, in a body bag on the beach. She says 'Long story', something to do with suppressing her life-signals so she could come ashore undetected, and I ask who was going to detect her? Department of Immigration? And she laughs and says no, nothing like that, and adds that she and her friend wind up in situations like that quite a lot. I am determined not to be fazed by this.

Lucie talks a lot but doesn't say much about herself. I ask her if she's from Liverpool because her accent is like John Lennon's and she says no, her accent is completely different. I ask her where she was when she heard John Lennon was shot and she says she doesn't remember.

The next morning I come by the beach house at 10.30 and Lucie is only just waking up. I wait downstairs for her to shower and dress and I play a cassette that I brought with me. She comes down and pours herself a bowl of Fruit Brute cereal: I want her to ask what the music is but she doesn't, so I tell her it's new material from the next Talking Heads album, which my friend Abe, whose stepbrother works at Warner, taped for me. She nods but I don't think she's

listening: then the tape goes on to the tracks with which Abe filled up the free ten minutes at the end – two different mixes of Madonna's *Crazy For You*, which will come out after *Material Girl* and is being held back from radio until then. Lucie sings along. She knows every word. It wouldn't be cool to ask her how she knows this, but I really want to ask. There's got to be more to her than she's telling me.

Instead, I try to prompt. 'You like Madonna?' I ask.

'Yeah,' she says. She adds nothing about how she knows the song.

I want to say 'So, do you, like, *know* Madonna or something?'

But I don't. 'What else do you like?' I say.

She flashes me a smile. 'Lots of stuff. Scissor Sisters, Pink, Sugababes, Gnarls Barkley, Lily Allen, Gorillaz, Goldfrapp, OutKast, The Killers...'

'Huh,' I say. 'Are those British groups?'

'Some of them.'

I nod. 'Cool.' Then I step through to the kitchen and write down as many of the names as I can remember. Later I'll call Dennis, if

he's still in London, and ask him to look out for any records by these groups.

We drive out for some breakfast and spend most of the day driving around. I buy Lucie some clothes and she offers to pay me back when the Doctor turns up: I tell her it doesn't matter whether she does or not. She can call it a Christmas gift. She gets a 'Frankie Say Relax' T-shirt, a navy blue Adidas track top, a pair of jeans, a pair of Converse and a pair of Ray-Bans, and she wears them for the rest of the day. I ask her what the deal is with her and this 'Doctor' guy and she says everybody asks that, but they're just travelling together. At six we go to a press preview of a new movie called *The Breakfast Club* which I may review for the student paper when I get back to Bennington. I was going to take Justine but she never called to make arrangements so I take Lucie: she swears she's seen it but I tell her she must have it confused with another movie. She whispers the whole plot to me just before the lights go down and it plays out just like she says.

Afterwards we grab some food and swing by my parents' house. I drop off my sister's clothes and show Lucie my new CD player, but she doesn't seem interested. I need to get more CDs before I go back to college. We head out to Pandora's Box on the strip and I put the radio on while I drive. The DJ on K-BILLY plays *Echo Beach* by Martha and the Muffins and Lucie sings along, laughing when she gets to the bridge: 'Actually, that's true – my job is very boring and I *am* an office clerk.'

'I thought you were travelling?'

'Yeah,' she says. 'For now.'

We walk into the club to the sound of The Psychedelic Furs and in a booth upstairs I find Jay, Cain, Donna, Blake, Neal, Tama and Linus. They obviously don't know what to make of Lucie, which pleases me. None of them wants to admit that, with all the noise in the club, they can't always understand her accent. She talks to the others for half an hour before the DJ plays *When Doves Cry* by Prince & the Revolution and Lucie goes downstairs to dance. Neal asks me about her, where she came from, and I tell him it's a long story. My plausible cover story is that a guy I know who's out of town asked me to show her around the city while she waits for him to get back. I mention she's staying at Cameron's beach house.

'He'll be cool with that, won't he?' I ask Neal.

'Sure,' says Neal. 'He's cool about everything. Any case, he's out of town till Sunday. With Gwen.'

I don't want another conversation about the greatness of Cameron Hayes, so I cut in with, 'Thanks for lending me the keys. Had a need for some neutral territory.'

'How'd it go with Justine?'

'Very, very awkwardly. I dunno... I guess I should've called her more this semester, but...'

Neal shrugs. 'You're on opposite coasts. It's inevitable. It's an authentic life experience. Enjoy it.'

'Enjoy it? The slow, almost imperceptible but still painful drift away from my high-school girlfriend? Enjoy it?'

'Authentic life experiences are few and far between, Anton.

Anyway, it was your own dumb idea to go study in the frozen East.'

'Yeah... coming back here, I do wonder whether it might've been a dumb idea to go.'

'You can still transfer. Take Jay's place at UCLA – he's as good as dropped out anyway.'

I hadn't heard about this and I'm about to ask more but I hear my name being called from the direction of the dance floor. I lean over the railing and Lucie is motioning to ask whether I want another drink. I nod and she gives me a thumbs-up, then sashays towards the bar to the beat of *Wordy Rappinghood* by Tom Tom Club.

I look around and Neal has joined me at the railing. He grins. 'Is she some kind of Eliza Doolittle project you have going?'

I laugh.

'Does she know about Justine?'

I'm going to say why would she? But then I realise I haven't mentioned Justine to Lucie at all, and I'm not sure why.

* * *

103

Hours later we're driving down Sunset, back to the beach house. Lucie's drinking a vanilla milkshake and wearing her sunglasses at night and *Boys of Summer* is on the stereo. And when we pull up to the house I'm just thinking what a good day this has been and we walk inside to find a blackened and charred corpse in the middle of the living-room carpet.

'Ah, California!' the Doctor says to Lucie when we enter the diner

on Saturday morning. He's a guy in his forties, with longish hair and a good-humoured face. He wears a T-shirt and grey pants, and there's a carrier bag on the seat next to him. 'So many memories. I died once in San Francisco, you know.' I introduce myself and he thanks me for reviving Lucie.

'What are you wearing?' Lucie asks him.

The Doctor looks down at his T-shirt, which bears the legend 'UC Santa Cruz Banana Slugs'. 'Oh, yes,' he says. 'My shirt and jacket got saturated in blood. Had to throw them away.'

'So where did the T-shirt come from?'

'I found it in a locker. What do you think?'

'You look like a total dork.'

'Not all of us have had time to go shopping,' he says, pointing at Lucie. She's wearing her new clothes again.

'Anton got me them,' she says.

The Doctor glances at me. 'How generous. Have you checked that the TARDIS is still there?'

'Yeah, down in Santa Monica.' She turns to me. 'The blue thing we drove past yesterday.' Back to the Doctor. 'From now on, can I have a key for it please?'

The Doctor clears his throat. 'I'll think about it.' Lucie is about to respond, but then a waitress comes in take our order.

While we wait for our food, Lucie explains to the Doctor about the blackened corpse in the beach house. We can't back this story up – the body disintegrated overnight. We didn't even find any little

pieces of it in the carpet. But that doesn't seem to make any difference to the Doctor, who just asks to be taken to the house.

'There's really nothing there,' I tell him.

'Could the body have been moved?' he asks.

'Don't think so,' says Lucie. 'I was there all night. I mean, I was asleep, but I think I'd have heard something.' I wasn't there all night. It creeped me out. !arrived this morning to find Lucie eating a Pop Tart and watching the last few specks of the body melt away.

When we finish our breakfast – the Doctor and I split the bill – we return to the house. The Doctor immediately looks in every room,

upstairs and downstairs, finishing up in the living room with Lucie and me. He asks me about Cameron, but I don't really know anything about him except he's rich and good-looking. He asks how long Cameron has had this beach house. I got the impression from Neal that he's had it a while – two or three years. The Doctor shakes his head.

'I visited Alison here last May.' Abruptly he steps over to the bookshelves and examines the books, then the records.

'He has some really cool records,' I say. 'There's a super rare Elvis Costello picture disc in there.'

The Doctor pulls out records and examines them, maybe ten records one after the other. He looks at the edges and the inner sleeves. 'I think... most of these are second-hand.'

'Why d'you say that?' asks Lucie.

‘Look. Most people are either careful with their records or they’re not. Some of these clearly aren’t new, but they’re still in good condition. Others are badly scuffed and scratched.’ He picks one up. ‘On this one, someone’s written the track times on the inner sleeve.’ He nods at the bookshelves. ‘Same with the books. Some of them have had their spines broken when reading, others have been read more carefully.’

I look at some of the records myself. Lucie says, ‘So?’

‘So if he’s so rich, why’s he buying his books and records second-hand when he could buy them from any shop on the high street? Aside from the Costello picture disc, which I agree is a nice piece and probably a real rarity.’

We all look at each other. Nobody has an answer.

The door opens and a man enters. He’s tall, blond, tanned and in his early twenties, and he wears a beach shirt, khaki pants and Ray-Bans. He removes them when he sees the three of us and looks at us with a curiosity that does not seem benign.

I step forward and make a pretty educated guess. ‘Cameron?’ I ask. The newcomer nods.

I thrust out a hand. ‘Anton. I’m a friend of Neal’s. He, uh, lent me the keys?’

Cameron stares at me for a couple more seconds, then he brightens. ‘Right. Sure.’ He shakes my hand. ‘Been in San Francisco on business. So how d’you like the place?’

‘Lovely,’ says Lucie.

‘We were just taking liberties with your record collection,’ says the Doctor. ‘You were right, Anton, he does have a copy of this – do you want to put it on?’ He hands me a copy of *More Specials* by the Specials. I take it from him, put it on the turntable and drop the needle on *International Jet Set*, because it’s my favourite track from this record.

Cameron steps over to the Doctor, standing over him. ‘So what’s your story, man?’ he says. ‘How do you know Anton?’

‘Uh… the Doctor’s kind of a guru,’ I say. ‘He knew the Beatles back in the sixties, right?’

The Doctor gives me a quick glance. ‘Oh, yes,’ he says. ‘I ran a little bookshop and gallery in London. McCartney gave me the start-up capital. I knew all those guys. Dave Davies. Scott Walker. Jimi Hendrix. Syd Barrett. Viv Stanshall…’

‘So what brings you to LA?’ asks Cameron.

‘He’s got a house in the Canyon,’ I say.

‘Used to be Keith Richards’s place,’ the Doctor adds. ‘He used to lend me the keys all the time, then one day, a few years ago, he said, “Doc, you’re there more than I am. Keep it.”’

‘Really?’ asks Cameron.

‘Yes. I don’t think he liked coming here so much after Gram died…’

I catch Lucie rolling her eyes.

The Doctor sees it too. ‘My niece here is visiting,’ he says pointedly. ‘So, how long have you had this place?’

‘Oh, a while. Maybe… summer before last?’

‘And what do you do, to be able to afford a place like this at your age?’

‘Uh, I’m an agent,’ says Cameron.

‘What kind of agent?’ says the Doctor.

‘Representation for actors mainly. My dad runs a literary agency back east.’

‘New York?’ I ask.

‘Yeah.’

‘Right. I’m at Bennington, thinking of majoring in creative writing. It’d be good to have a contact. When I graduate, I mean.’

Cameron smiles slowly and nods. ‘Sure, buddy. I’d be happy to.’

Ten long minutes later, we’re driving away from the house, Lucie in the passenger seat and the Doctor sitting in the middle of the back seat, leaning forwards. I keep thinking of those films we used to watch in driver’s ed where a guy with no seat belt goes through the front windshield.

I can tell the Doctor thinks there’s something weird about Cameron, and because the Doctor thinks so then Lucie does too. For what it’s worth, so do I. ‘How does he know your friends?’ the Doctor asks.

I ask Lucie to switch the radio on before I answer. ‘I don’t know, really. Like I said, I’ve been away at college.’

‘But until you came home, you’d never heard of him?’

‘I’d never met him. I… maybe I remember someone mentioning him. But he was never around.’

I’m watching the road, but I can see from the corner of my eye that the Doctor is staring at me. ‘Anton, if you’ve got any suspicions, do share them with us.’

‘Incidentally,’ says Lucie, ‘we’re not asking because we’re mean and we like hearing bad things about people. We will actually try and do something about it.’ She points at the radio. ‘Is this REM? They sound different.’

We stop at a light. ‘Everyone likes him.’

‘So you can’t think of anything,’ says Lucie.

‘No. That’s the thing. I’ve been home for four days. He’s been out of town. I’ve hung out every night with people who know him. Nobody has a bad thing to say. Normally, on any given night with those guys, half the conversation will consist of talking behind the back of whoever’s not there. But not with him.’ Should I be saying this? Could just be that I’m jealous. He’s taken over from me. Cameron is the new Anton. This year’s model.

The light changes. I drive on.

Five o’clock and Lucie and I are at Donna’s house where she and Blake are watching *Raiders of the Lost Ark* on VHS. We have a brief from the Doctor to turn the conversation to Cameron. This does not prove difficult. As I’ve heard a lot about him already, Lucie leads the discussion. It’s like reading a group talk about their biggest influence in *Rolling Stone* or something.

Lucie: When did you meet Cameron?

Donna: I heard about him a few times from...

Blake: Gwen knew him first.

D: Gwen *dumped* you for him.

B: The Gwen thing was going nowhere. I don't have a beef with the guy. They make a nice couple.

D: He's turned her around. Remember how... vague and distant she used to be? You remember, Anton?

Me: Sure. Since I came back from college, she's like a whole

different person.

D: That was him. He straightened her out I was so surprised the first time I saw them together – I thought she'd invented him. You know

how she used to do that I never used to believe a word she said. If

she said 'Good morning' I'd check my watch to make sure it wasn't

afternoon.

B: They looked kind of weird at first, but now they make sense.

D: Anyway, he's just... an inspiring person to have around. For everyone. He's only a couple years older than us, but –

(Pause while Indy is menaced by a guy with a sword. We all watch

him pull a gun and shoot the guy and we all cheer.)

B: Sure, he just... has a way of seeing through a problem. You know? You can just present a problem to him and he'll say, 'Well,

what I would do...'

D: And he's right.

B: Yeah. You know what he's got? Clarity.

D: That's a good word.

B: Thanks. I heard him use it.

It seems to make sense to meet Gwen next, which we are fortunately able to do without Cameron being there. The meeting occurs at a Mexican restaurant called Casa Lucey's. Lucie likes this, even though it isn't quite spelled right In fact, she makes me get my Polaroid camera out of the glovebox of my car and take a picture of her standing next to the sign.

Gwen looks noticeably different from back in the summer. She washes her hair. She sits up fairly straight. She eats food – this *never* used to happen. You'd see her in a restaurant, but she'd just order a side dish which she'd let everyone else eat, then she'd make a glass of Diet Coke last two hours.

Tonight she is lively. She talks about the future – I mean the real future, like what's going to happen to her next year and the year after that and the year after that, rather than the sci-fi future she used to speculate wildly about back when she lived in the twilight zone. She actually doesn't talk about Cameron as quickly as we expect: instead she asks Lucie questions about herself. Along the way I discover that Lucie was interested in a career in the police but work experience put her off; that shortly before she started travelling she broke up with a guy who was a few years older when she realised what a 'sad act' he was; and that the Doctor has introduced her to 'proper cheese – the stuff with mould on it and that'. When the conversation does turn to Cameron, it emerges that he has been telling Gwen that she should take more of an interest in people. This explains the first part of the conversation.

'He recognises when people have real... qualities,' Gwen says.

'He sees potential. And I think he really has the talent to bring

things out of people.'

'Makes sense,' says Lucie. 'I mean, in his line of work, that's

what you need, isn't it?'

'I guess,' says Gwen. 'But I wonder how long he'll stick with

that. He's good at it and all, but he's always had his eye on bigger 108

things.'

'Is he gonna run for president?' I joke.

Gwen shrugs.

Later that night in the Troubadour I nod my head in time with *Pump Me Up* by Grandmaster Melle Mel and the Furious Five – tonight's guest DJ is from New York and wants us to know it – while half-listening to Linus tell me about how Cameron helped him to get his

new car, a Porsche 928, after his parents took his previous car away and sold it: according to Linus, they didn't need the money or

anything, they're just exacting revenge on him for deferring his

Berkeley place. He complains in detail about his parents, then he

enthuses in detail about the car, and then I catch something strange:

'... and, y'know, the guy's *dead*, and the car would've just gone to the County or something. But I'm gonna appreciate it, right?'

'What do you mean, the guy's dead?' I ask.

'I mean he's dead. I mentioned that, right?'

'How come he died?'

'Cameron killed him.'

'Cameron killed him for the car?'

'No, no,' laughs Linus. 'The car was a bonus. Cameron sorted the

guy's will so he got the car and nobody ever suspected a thing. He's so smart.'

‘But Cameron killed him?’

‘Oh, yeah. Didn’t you hear about this?’

‘No.’

‘Oh. Sorry, man. Didn’t realise you were out of the loop. Didn’t Gwen say something?’

‘No.’

‘Right. Well, it’s like he’s got this way of sucking out people’s essence, if you see what I mean? I can’t believe nobody told you this. He did it in front of us over at Tama’s when her parents were away just before Halloween.’

‘He killed somebody in front of you?’

‘Yeah. I mean, would we have believed it otherwise? Unlikely.’

‘Who’d he kill?’

‘Some Hispanic guy. Don’t worry. He never gets caught or anything, and we’re all safe – we’re his friends. He says he’s gonna help us out, like when he gets more powerful? Because that’s what it does, this thing he does. It’s like transference or whatever it’s called.’ Linus sips his drink. ‘Sorry, dude. I thought you knew.’

I look at my watch. I don’t want this to seem suspicious, so I’m going to wait 15 minutes and make some conversation with him about his car and the new Replacements album and this girl he’s

obsessed with called Jayne who’s still at high school, and then I’m going to go and get Lucie who is talking to Tama at the bar and we’re going to leave and ask the Doctor what we can do about all

this.

My world is changing around me, and I'm wondering why it feels so normal. I conclude that I'm probably not thinking about it enough. But there's no time.

'I just can't believe they're all oh-so-blasé about it,' says Lucie.

We're in a cheapish hotel called the Hobart Arms in Santa Monica where the Doctor has rented some rooms. Echo and the Bunnymen are on the radio. The Doctor sits cross-legged on the bed, now wearing a white shirt and a 1960s-style jacket he picked up at a thrift store this afternoon. Lucie sits on the deep window ledge. I stand by the dresser, looking a little embarrassed because these are my friends we're talking about, and I can't believe it either and I want Lucie and the Doctor to know this. Either I've changed, or my friends have changed, or... How can they not care? I keep thinking: does Justine know?

'Is it possible, what Linus told me?' I ask. 'Can you really suck the essence out of somebody like that?'

'Oh, it's certainly possible,' says the Doctor. 'Made more plausible by the unexplained disappearance of my friend Alison.'

His face clouds, and I remember that there's a personal aspect to this for him.

Lucie looks concerned. 'Oh, no. So she did disappear?'

'According to the Malibu Police Department, yes.' He snaps his fingers. 'Right. First question: what is Cameron?'

'What do you mean, what is he?' I say.

‘It’s the old human-or-alien-disguised-as-human question, isn’t it?’ says Lucie. ‘Where’s the smart money, Doctor?’

‘The first person to meet him was your friend Gwen, yes?’ says the Doctor.

I nod.

‘And from what you told me, she was something of a fantasist.’

‘That Donna girl said she thought she’d made Cameron up so she could give this other bloke the brush-off,’ says Lucie.

‘Well, I’ll tell you what I’ve been doing today,’ says the Doctor.

‘I’ve been looking into our friend Cameron’s past, and –’

‘Let me guess – you couldn’t find any record of him past a few months ago.’

‘Actually I could. But it was all a little sketchy. Didn’t ring true. And I couldn’t find any record of this literary agency his father runs either.’

‘He might have just made that up for my benefit,’ I say.

‘Maybe. But remember his books and records being second-hand, and the fact that he claimed to have owned the beach house for longer than he really has. He’s trying to look like he has more of a history than he does.’

‘Are you saying that Gwen invented him somehow?’ asks Lucie.

‘Why would she do that?’ I ask.

‘Probably for the reason your friend Donna thought – a social excuse. She probably didn’t expect him to become real. But

imagine, she starts talking about him and in the minds of your friends he becomes a real person. If Gwen has problems distinguishing fantasy from reality, when she meets him one day she simply adjusts. She forgets she made him up.'

'So he's come out of nowhere?' I say.

'Not nowhere,' says the Doctor. 'I recognise the modus operandi, especially the murders. My guess is he's a Concepton – abstract beings who hover in the cracks between planes of reality, looking to take on corporeal form. This ambiguity between your friends created the opportunity: a space opened in the world for someone to exist, and he filled the gap. But he'll be dependent on them to an extent. Their idea of him keeps him stable, the killings give him energy.' He rests his head on his hand briefly. 'I mean, it makes sense, doesn't it?'

I look over at Lucie.

'Just say yes,' she says.

'So what do we do?' I ask.

The next day, I call the beach house. Cameron is home and I ask if I can borrow some of his records for the Christmas Eve party tonight. He says sure, and I say the Doctor's going to swing by around four o'clock to collect them. Then Lucie and I head to some outlet stores in Santa Monica. 'Maybe you shouldn't do this,' I say.

'Someone's got to,' she says, sifting through cheap sweatshirts.

'Yeah,' I say, 'but I could hire an actress or something.'

'It's Christmas Eve.'

‘Work is work. We could get somebody.’

‘And how would we explain what we needed her to do?’

I admit this is more of a challenge.

‘I’ll do it,’ says Lucie. ‘It’s fine.’

‘Can you do the accent?’

She smiles. ‘I’m getting better, I think. Listen.’ She approximates an Illinois accent and improvises a line about what she saw on TV last night.

‘Right,’ I say. ‘That sounds sorta more Minnesota to me.’

‘Could I be from Minnesota instead?’

‘I guess, as long as you’re consistent.’

‘Test me.’

‘Okay. What’s your name?’

‘Darlene Fishman,’ she says, using her accent.

‘Where do you live?’

‘My mom and dad’s house.’

‘No, I mean where’s the place?’

‘Uh… Jefferson County.’

‘Who’s your husband?’

‘Jim Fishman. But he’s changed his name. He calls himself “Cameron” now.’ She says ‘Cameron’ as if it was the most pretentious name imaginable. We worked all this out this morning, me, Lucie and the Doctor, like an exercise from class – sketching

out a character, making sure you know all the key things about them. She continues. ‘He upped and left me and my little baby girl, and left me working nights in the 7-Eleven to make ends meet. I never get to see *Dallas* no more.’ She looks up at me and slips back into British. ‘Was that too much?’

‘No, that was good. Where did Cameron work?’

‘Hardware store,’ she says as Darlene. ‘He could sell anything to anyone – just told them they needed it until they believed him. But he’s a big, big liar. *Never* believe a word he says. Never.’ Back to her own voice again. ‘Do I know about him killing people?’

‘Yeah. Makes it more convincing that you know him really well.’

In addition to her sweatshirt, Lucie picks up a pair of styleless jeans (loose, to make her look overweight), some jewellery (including a ten-dollar wedding band) and unbranded trainers. She changes into these clothes before she leaves the store. My friends won’t notice that the clothes are new, only that they’re bad. She suggests buying some cheap soap: she washes her face with it and her skin becomes dry. She applies product to her hair and leaves it flat, so it looks unwashed. This transformation costs $47 (of my money). Afterwards, we meet the Doctor in the food court. He takes pictures of Lucie and I give him the photos of Cameron and Gwen together that I stole from Donna’s house this morning while Lucie kept her distracted in the kitchen. Then he eats a cookie and leaves. Lucie and I spend an hour continuing to flesh out Darlene. The Doctor returns with some photographs which amaze me: I’ve seen

fakes before but never this good. He's produced these three totally real-looking images of Cameron with 'Darlene', modified their clothing so it's different in each picture, and from somewhere he's got backdrops of a small dingy living room, a bar and a park. A fourth photograph shows 'Darlene' with a six-month-old child.

'These are awesome,' I tell him. 'How did you do these?'

112

The Doctor smiles at me and totally ignores the question. He gives them to Lucie, along with a 'MISSING' poster bearing Cameron's face and the name of Jim Fishman and a birth certificate for his 'daughter' (should this be called into question). Then he looks at his watch.

'Time to go?' says Lucie.

The Doctor nods.

The Doctor goes to Cameron's, Lucie and I go to Justine's. It has to be Justine, because all the others have met Lucie already – because, I admit, I've been avoiding Justine since the beach house three nights ago. Lucie and I sit in the car. No music, because Lucie is trying to concentrate. She reads back the notes she's made on 'Darlene' one more time.

'I feel like I'm cramming for an exam,' she says.

'Are you good at exams?'

'Not bad, actually.' Abruptly, she puts the notebook in the glovebox and opens the car door. 'Come on.'

Justine's mom opens the door and she seems happy to see me – I

think she was banking on me talking her daughter into not deferring her college place another year – but she clearly has no clue what Lucie is all about. Justine is home and we go up to her room.

The weird look that Justine's mom gave us is nothing compared to the look that Justine gives us. She is surprised to see me and alarmed to see Lucie. I'm a little taken aback myself, because I still haven't got used to Justine as a blonde. I keep referring back to earlier memories of her. I can't seem to shake it.

'This is Darlene,' I say.

'Uh huh,' says Lucie, with accent. Sounds good. Justine will probably buy it, it's not like she actually *knows* anybody from the Midwest. Lucie looks Justine up and down with a very slight sneer on her face.

'How interesting,' says Justine. 'So, what brings you to... Anton, exactly?'

'You know a guy called – well, who calls himself – Cameron?' says Lucie. 'Cameron *Hayes*?'

'Yeah, sure. We all know him. Anton knows him.' She looks to me for confirmation.

Belatedly, I nod.

'I've got a story about him,' she says. 'I told it to him, now I'm gonna tell it to you. He said you were smart. You'd know what to do.'

From this point onwards I'm vaguely aware of what's going on. I'm aware of Lucie sitting down without waiting to be invited to do

so, and Justine following suit, but I continue to stand. I hear Lucie going through the well-rehearsed tale of the 'truth' about Cameron, I see her showing Justine the photographs and – yes – the birth certificate and 'MISSING' poster, and explaining how he's out to scam her and her friends for all the money he can get. I hear Justine saying it's ridiculous and telling us to get out and I manage to snap out of it and involve myself and convince her to listen some more to 'Darlene'. I watch Justine try to call Cameron at the beach house, and get no answer. I know we're winning. I know that Lucie is doing very, very well. I know that somewhere, Justine has some doubts and they're growing fast. But I spend the whole time – it must be close to an hour – standing here and trying to remember how it used to feel to look at her, and wondering why it doesn't feel like that any more.

Lucie and I head back to Malibu – Lucie begs me for five minutes to change her clothes and make-up, which she does in a department store restroom – and call at the house just before six. Cameron is still there and still seems okay, so is the Doctor: I'm surprised the Doctor has kept him talking all this time. But Cameron hasn't killed him, so everything is still on course. Cameron offers Lucie and me a beer, which we both accept – the Doctor shoots Lucie a disapproving look, to which Lucie replies, 'Oh, give over.'

When Cameron returns and we sit down, the Doctor says, 'Now... where was I?'

'You went to see Syd...' says Cameron.

'Yes,' says the Doctor. 'I asked him what this was all about, him being kicked out of the group, and he said, "What are you talking

about, Doc?" and offered me some biscuits. I showed him the latest *Melody Maker*. He seemed surprised, but said it didn't mean anything. Obviously I went straight to see Roger and asked what he was playing at. He said Syd had been told everything. Everyone was sad about it. Syd just couldn't take it

I remember how I introduced the Doctor to Cameron yesterday: he's picked up on it and run with it. He's playing the ageing hipster bore, telling endless anecdotes and dropping name after name. Cameron seems totally sucked in by it – probably thinking the Doctor is his route to yet higher social circles. All that worries me is that there's no sign yet of whether what Lucie and I did is going to have any effect. We have to keep Cameron away from the others until word's had chance to spread a little. It shouldn't take much, according to the Doctor. A few doubts. But if one of them talks to him, he'll only talk them out of it– so we have to keep him here.

Even with the Doctor's excellent performance, any lull in the

conversation makes me nervous and I put a record on to fill any silences. I choose *All Over The Place* by The Bangles and I'm so nervous I put side two on by mistake, but I pretend I meant to and leave it to play out.

The conversation continues. The Doctor claims to have suggested Leeds as a venue for The Who's 1970 live album and recommended to David Geffen that he sign Jackson Browne, and I'm turning the record over to side one just as the Doctor is claiming to have played tambourine on *CSN* by Crosby, Stills & Nash when Cameron suddenly looks tired.

The Doctor glances at me, then back at Cameron. ‘Are you all right?’ he asks.

Cameron shakes his head. ‘Excuse me,’ he says and starts to stand up. However, the Doctor stands more quickly and – without aggression –pushes him back down into his chair.

‘I’d prefer you to stay where you are,’ the Doctor says.

The Doctor told us this would happen. Word must be getting around. Justine will have told Gwen. She will have told Donna, and Blake will probably have been there at the time – if so, he’s probably told Linus. Telephone calls going back and forth. Everyone suddenly realising how little they really know about this person. What if he *does* have a white-trash wife and kid? What if he’s a *fake*? What if he’s not someone we *want* to know?

Cameron looks up at him, struggles to focus. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Stopping you.’ He turns to me. ‘Lucie, the rope –’

Lucie stands, steps over to Cameron and pulls a rope from her pocket that I didn’t know she had. She starts to tie Cameron’s hands. But Cameron’s not as weak as we thought: he punches Lucie in the chest and she falls back into the Christmas tree, getting scratched and caught in the branches. Then Cameron leaps at the Doctor and knocks him to the floor. He pins the Doctor with his knee and elbow and reaches out to his throat. His fingers make a sizzling sound on contact. At this point I realise I’m just standing and staring at them while I hold the needle above the run-in groove.

I throw myself at Cameron, knocking him off the Doctor and into the door to the beach. As he tries to get up I square up to fight and I realise that I don't actually know how to.

Fortunately Lucie gets up first and punches Cameron in the gut, winding him. I note, with satisfaction, that the needle has fallen onto the record and it is now playing.

'The rope,' says the Doctor, a little hoarsely, as he stands up.

Lucie picks up the rope and I bundle Cameron onto his front. By now he really is too weak to fight back, and we tie his hands and

legs easily.

I expect Cameron to say something, make some show of defiance. But he doesn't. Instead, Lucie, the Doctor and I sit back down and The Bangles keep on playing while Cameron wheezes, chokes and slowly melts away.

The Doctor stays at the house to 'dissipate the energy'. I have no idea how he's going to do this, but he says it'll take a couple hours and so Lucie and I head over to a park in Dogtown to kill some time. I find a public telephone that works and call Justine.

'Oh,' she says. 'It's you.'

'Yeah,' I say.

'What do you want?'

'I just wondered... about earlier, you know.'

'Oh. Yeah. Well, I talked to Gwen and a couple other people. And we're not saying we necessarily believe what that skank said

about him, but...'

'... you're not sure?'

A pause. 'No. I mean, we wanna hear what Cameron has to say. I'm gonna give him a chance, you know, but, I mean, there's a lot that we've only got his word for. We've been trying to call the house, but there's no answer.'

That's because the Doctor unplugged the telephone hours ago. I don't say that. 'If he knew Darlene's tracked him down, he may have split already.'

'If it's true,' she says.

I sigh. 'You knew he was killing people. But suddenly you don't want to know him because he lied about where he came from?'

'He was honest about what he did. He... told us all we'd be okay with him.'

'Not me.'

'Yeah... I know you weren't around, but I wouldn't have let him hurt you. He was – well, I *thought* he was good that way. He was gonna help us all.'

'There are more people in the world than just us,' I say. 'Excuse me... I have to go meet a friend.'

I find Lucie in a small crowd watching two guys dressed as Santa Claus having a skate-off. Someone has a ghetto blaster playing A Flock of Seagulls. One of the skaters tries to come out of a fifty-fifty grind with a heelflip, but his white furry trouser cuff catches on the nose of his board and he wipes out hard. There's blood. Some

people cheer, including Lucie. Then she turns, sees me and smiles.

‘How did it go?’ she asks.

116

‘They’re all still talking about him,’ I say. ‘I didn’t tell them he’s already gone.’

‘I didn’t mean that. I mean you and her. She’s blatantly your girlfriend. Or ex-girlfriend.’

‘Oh. Yeah. Well, that’s been up in the air since I went away to college.’

‘And now?’

‘Now... it’s come down.’

Lucie nods. ‘So what are you going to do now?’

‘I was gonna go to a Christmas Eve party, but maybe I’ll stay home with my folks. Do you... want to come?’

Lucie glances over her shoulder. ‘I think me and the Doctor should be getting on. Always stuff to do. Anyway, other people’s family Christmases are always a bit weird.’

I nod. ‘Sure,’ I say. ‘Will I see you again?’

Lucie shrugs, smiling. ‘Maybe we’ll come back here one day. I don’t know.’

I remember something. I reach into my pocket, find the photograph of her by the Casa Lucey’s sign. ‘You wanted this,’ I say.

She looks at it and says, ‘Keep it,’ which is what I wanted her to say.

She leans over and kisses me on the cheek, then disappears from my field of vision. As she goes, I look at the photograph instead of at her.

117

In Case of Emergencies

Ian Farrington

An Adventure of Philip Fowler, with the Fourth Doctor

My collar was too tight, too stiff Starch. I could feel the sharp edge cutting into my flesh and knew it was going to leave a mark on my neck. I could hear Mr Dickson too, telling me that morning that a starched collar was necessary.

I'd wanted to scream at him. It wasn't necessary: breathing is necessary, eating is necessary. A starched collar is just a *pretence*. It isn't respectability, it isn't good breeding, it isn't a well-ordered society. It's just the representation of those things. A symbol. It means nothing in itself, it's not *real*, and that's why I'd wanted to scream at Mr Dickson. But it wouldn't have done me any good. He would have sacked me on the spat. Then where would I have been?

I rubbed at my neck, my finger tugging between the shirt and my skin, as the lift descended to the ground floor. I was growing more and more fond of the times I was alone in the lift, when I could drop the act for just a few moments. Be myself.

I'd noticed a pattern in these solo rides. In the mornings, guests left the hotel or went down to the dining room, so I was on my own mostly when going up. The afternoon had no rhyme or reason to it, nor did the evening – as many people were going out for the night as were returning to their rooms.

I used the time with no guests – the brief few seconds between floors when I was heading up or down on my own – to let the facade drop, to close my eyes, and prepare for the next part of the act. Because that was what I was doing, wasn't it? Playing a part, pretending to be someone I wasn't, trying to fit in.

It was a Saturday in May, and the hotel was sombre and quiet. The King had died the day before. Edward VII had finally given out and given up. I listened all day to people in muted conversations, staff and guests alike, everyone discussing the new king, George V, and how the family would be coping at this tragic time. I saw gentlemen with black armbands – as if wearing a bit of cloth somehow made

the world better, or in some way made up for the fact that someone had died. Ladies wore black, and I saw some of them weeping. Who decided that black was the colour of mourning? It could have been brown or red or white – what difference would it have made to the human race?

Mr Dickson had the Union Jack on top of the hotel's roof lowered to half mast, apparently. Appearances must be kept. We must be seen to do the proper thing.

All day I'd gone up and down in that lift, standing with people who barely noticed I was there as they said this and that about the future of the Royal Family – would the new king return us to the good old days of Victoria? Would George carry out his duties with the dignity that was required? I thought about answering them –

telling them that it was all useless. The whole stupid idea of the royalty would be all dead and gone within a generation. We're progressing, evolving, and the old-fashioned days are numbered. But then I thought of Mr Dickson. I couldn't afford to risk my job.

The lift reached the ground floor. The bell rang and the doors opened. A man ran inside – actually ran. 'Quickly!' he said. 'The fifth floor! Now!'

I didn't know it at the time but it was the Doctor. The last person I would speak to before I died.

I must have paused slightly, taken aback by his manner perhaps, because the Doctor leaned across me and pushed the button for the fifth floor. 'Excuse me, sir,' I said – I still don't know why I did. 'But I'm supposed to press the button.' What was I saying? I'd spent countless times silently urging the hotel guests to push the button for themselves, just to see if any would be brave enough to do it, to break with convention. The ridiculous thing was that I still wasn't brave enough not to push it. Even after everything I'd thought, or dreamt of, I always pressed the button like a mindless sheep.

'What difference does it make?' the Doctor said as the doors rattled shut. He stared dead ahead, not even glancing at me. I was more than used to that from the usual guests – the gentlemen and peers and minor royals and politicians. But the Doctor was different, I could see that He was tall, imposing, but not like a toff. And he was dressed like a Bohemian poet, all scruffy and

mismatched and out of proportion. He gathered up one length of his massive scarf and threw it over his shoulder – its frayed end flapped at my face, and I couldn't help laughing under my breath.

I looked up to the dial above the door, moving around its half moon. First floor, second floor, third floor, fourth. Fourth. Fourth.

The needle juddered between the fourth and the fifth numbers, then I realised why: the whole lift carriage had stopped, the sound of a grinding mechanism above us. After a beat, the noise stopped but we were still.

'Come on,' the Doctor barked. 'What's happening?'

'I... I don't know, sir,' I said.

The Doctor stretched up and pushed the dial's needle with his finger until it pointed to the number five. I smiled, and again tried not to laugh at this strange man. The needle's only a representation of where we are – it's not like you can move the lift simply by moving the needle.

I just knew the Doctor was unique – easy to say now, I suppose, but it was more than just him being oddly dressed and a bit forward. It was like there was no nonsense with him at all – what you saw was what you got. And he wasn't wearing an armband, I noticed. He was the first gentleman I'd seen that day that hadn't been.

He stopped fiddling with the dial, noticed me and smiled back.

'Well, it was worth a try, wasn't it?'

'I don't think the motor works that way, sir,' I said, grinning.

'Oh, I know. But it's hard to tell in life sometimes. What's real

and what isn't. In a car, you steer a wheel that, in turn, moves the axle. They're directly linked. It's not like the wheel is just to help you visualise the wheels on the ground. So why not in a lift? That would be a splendid idea, wouldn't it? Better than that lifeless button. I mean, what sense of movement do you get from a button?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'I need to get to the fifth floor,' he said. 'Is there any way out of this box?'

'Not that I know of, sir.'

'Why not?' he said. 'You're the lift porter. Shouldn't you know these things? And don't call me "sir". You're not my bank manager.' He tried to prise the doors open. 'Well, come on. Help me.'

And I did. I joined in, the two of us combining our strengths. But even with us both we couldn't get them open. The Doctor leaned in close to the crack between the doors and shouted for help. He really roared – no restrain, no manners, no holding back in case someone might see him or hear him or pass judgement.

I laughed – I couldn't help it. The Doctor really was this force of nature. After a moment, I called out too and we both shouted for help, telling anyone within earshot that we were trapped.

'Fowler? We can hear you!' The voice was faint and was echoing, but the Doctor and I could hear it. It was Billy Crawford, one of the junior porters. 'We've sent someone out for the brigade.

We'll have you out as quick as we can, see if we don't. Just sit

tight!'

"'Sit tight," he says!' said the Doctor. 'Sit tight! We can't just sit tight – I need to get to the fifth floor.' He was in a rage now, pacing the eight feet from one wall of the lift to the other. 'I can't just sit tight,' he said as he suddenly sat down on the floor.

And we had to wait, listening to the occasional noises that reverberated down the lift shaft – the mumble of voices, the slamming of doors. There was nothing else to do. The Doctor looked deep in thought, lines of worry on his face. But real worry. Most of the people in the hotel didn't have real worries – they had fake worries. Worries that didn't matter: which hat to wear, who to invite to dinner, where to go hunting this season. The Doctor had lived, I could just... sense that. Not like me, with my pretend existence: he had *lived*.

'What's your name?' he suddenly asked.

'Um. Fowler, sir.'

'Fowler what?'

'Philip, I mean, sir. Philip Fowler.'

'Nice to meet you, Philip. I'm the Doctor.' He still looked sombre, serious, almost desperate. 'How long do you think we'll be trapped here? Has this happened often?'

I told him I didn't know. I'd never been trapped in the lift before.

'Really?' he said. 'That's odd, isn't it? It's 1910. I would have imagined the lifts were breaking down all the time. It seems you've been lucky, Philip.'

'Why do you need to get upstairs so quickly?' I asked. I wouldn't

have said it to anyone else. No one else would have allowed me to be so forward.

'I'm looking for someone, someone dangerous, and I know he's in this hotel. The last report I had said he was on the fifth floor. It's very important that I find him.'

He didn't want to go into any detail, that much was clear. I imagined him being from Scotland Yard, on the trail of diamond smugglers, or, even better, some eccentric private detective chasing a murderer. In an instant, I pictured myself as his loyal Dr Watson, asking naive questions and over-emphasising irrelevant clues.

But it was the Doctor who asked question after question. He wanted to know so much, and I remember being surprised that he didn't know the King had died the day before. He wasn't surprised that he had died, just that it had happened yesterday. 'I hadn't realised what day it was,' he said. I told him about myself, but kept it vague – why would he be interested in me? Anyway, I was more interested in him. It was odd to be allowed to talk to one of my

'betters', but at the same time so freeing, so liberating. I felt properly alive for the first time. I think I knew how quickly I was talking, and how loosely. But the Doctor was listening, really listening. And before I knew it, I was talking about the King's death. The Doctor listened and listened.

'It's emblematic,' I said. 'Edward dying now. It has more meaning than anyone knows. The Liberals have been in power for five years – Asquith and Churchill have been passing more and

more socially conscious legislation. The old world order is crumbling. Britain is changing for the better. Lloyd George's budget advocates the redistribution of wealth. The Government is striving for pensions, national insurance for workers, trades unions. Soon, all adults will have the vote – irrespective of gender, irrespective of wealth. The House of Commons is standing up to the Lords. Democracy advances. Class barriers are being broken. 'We're breaking free from convention and the world is full of possibilities. The Victorian era is gone and dead, and now even the Edwardian decade has come to an end.'

I caught my breath, expecting the Doctor to say something. I think I genuinely thought he'd applaud or something. But he just stared, not blinking. Not breathing, as far as I could see. Had I gone too far? Had I said too much? Despite what I thought of him, he was a guest in a Mayfair hotel, after all. And I was just a servant.

'A man has died,' the Doctor said at last. 'Whatever your opinion of him, don't you think he deserves your compassion? Deserves to be mourned?' Had I misjudged him? I'd been so overwhelmed by meeting what I thought was a kindred spirit that I'd assumed the Doctor would share my views. I'd tricked myself, I suppose; been taken in by the Doctor's clothes, his attitude, his manner. But, in the end, were they just like anyone else's clothes, attitudes and manner?

The lords and ladies staying at the hotel, the politicians and toffs that walk the Mayfair streets outside, even Mr Dickson and the rest of the hotel staff – everyone is false, every single one. It's all an act. What they wear is just a costume designed to convey a meaning, no

better or worse than a clown. How they act tells others who they are, how they should be treated. It doesn't mean anything. It's not real.

Was the Doctor the same? Was he no better or worse than a clown? 'The world will change,' I said – there was no going back now. 'And it's people like me who will change it'

'That's all very good,' said the Doctor. 'But you're still standing up. You still see me as somehow better – or, at least, subconsciously you want me to think that. Although, you have stopped calling me "sir". That's good, Philip. You're learning.'

'Do you see it as a coincidence, then?' I snapped. 'Edward dying now, in 1910? The world is changing so much, and the man who's given the last decade its name dies –'

'Yes, but Mark Twain died last month,' said the Doctor. 'What does that signify? Eh? What greater meaning for the world does that have?'

'I don't know who that is.'

'It signifies nothing – just that a 75-year-old man sadly passed away. You're seeing patterns that aren't there, Philip. You're right in some respects: the world will change. This is a key time in human history. It's ten years into the most revolutionary century imaginable. Technology, society, communications, media, ethics... war. The next hundred years will see so much change. So many developments for both better and worse.'

I didn't ask how the Doctor knew any of this. I still don't know, even now. 'Yes,' I said. 'And great men cause change.'

'Yes, they will,' said the Doctor. 'And women too. Perhaps people like you, Philip. People who strive for a better world. People who don't just accept their lot or the slams quo. People who question things in life. But, I'm sorry, Philip. You're not going to be one of them.'

I couldn't believe it. Who was he to say that? What did he know?

The Doctor stood up, his whole manner changing again. He towered over me, this man who'd come into my life and turned my world upside down. The man who, in a matter of mere moments, had been a guest to kowtow to, a beacon of the new order, someone who listened to me. A man who, in that short space of time, had made me laugh, made me reveal my beliefs and who now was terrifying me. And I still don't know just how he did it.

'Who are you?' I asked, shaking. I pulled at my starched collar, running my finger around the neckline, trying to get more air.

'I'm just me, Philip,' the Doctor said. 'The question is, who are you?' My mind was a blur – I couldn't concentrate on anything, a thousand thoughts all racing around my brain at once. I saw Mr Dickson with his styled moustache, Billy Crawford in his silly hat, and guest after guest walking into the lift, not one of them paying me any attention. I saw the hotel's lobby, and the bright sunny days outside the front entrance. I saw black armbands and metal buttons and flags at half mast. I saw kings dying and empires toppling and it all being caused by a man simply pressing a button.

‘Who are you?’ I asked again. ‘What are you doing to me?’

‘Tell me, Philip,’ said the Doctor, his voice low and calm.

‘Where were you born?’

123

My mind was still cloudy, thoughts and memories just out of my reach. It was like I’d forgotten how to think. I didn’t know what was happening to me, what I was feeling.

And I couldn’t remember where I had been born.

‘What are your parents’ names?’ the Doctor said. ‘Where did you go to school?’

I fell to the floor, all scrunched up into a ball, that damn collar digging into my neck. ‘I don’t know!’ I screamed again and again. I looked up at the Doctor. ‘Help me,’ I said – more of a question than a request.

‘I wish I could,’ the Doctor said. ‘Believe me, I really wish I could. But this isn’t just a case of amnesia. You can’t be cured.

Philip, before this morning you didn’t exist. You don’t really exist now. You’re not alive; you’re not a sentient life. You were created for a purpose – a programme designed for a purpose.’

‘Created…’ I swallowed. ‘Progamme…’

‘You were given a basic cover identity, and placed in this hotel. The identity was unfortunately not very complex – especially when questioned. But you were put here, in this hotel, on this day, for a reason.’

‘How do you know all this?’ I realised I could feel tears on my cheeks. Were they real?

‘You’re the thirty-third of your kind I’ve found today,’ the Doctor said. ‘You were all put in subservient positions around London. You were given certain traits – a yearning for revolution, a desire for change, some basic factual knowledge. That was mixed up with some false memories and here you are. All I needed to do was not wear an armband, ask a few questions. Sometime this evening, you would have been approached by your “keeper” and activated... An alien invasion would have begun. You’re one of the advance guard, placed strategically incognito in readiness of the main force’s arrival. Edwardian England would have been revolutionised by midnight.’

‘It isn’t Edwardian England any more,’ I said numbly.

From above, I could hear the sound of the lift shaft’s doors on the fifth floor being prised open.

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘I suppose it isn’t. And revolution will have to wait for another day.’

And the last thing I saw was the Doctor reach out with a small wand, flashing its beam of light across my eyes.

124

Puppeteer

Benjamin Adams

An Adventure of Annajin Valentin,

with the Fourth Doctor and Oliver Day

It followed mankind to the stars.

Perhaps it came from the stars itself once; but having taken a

liking to us, it stayed with us and fed on us. That base instinct, that dark thought in the back of all our minds. The black heart of ourselves.

It called itself the Puppeteer, and it styled itself the sum of all our evil. Its path through the worlds of the Empire was well camouflaged. It tended to head for trouble spots, places where its brutality would blend in. Rebellions. Police states on the rim. Oh, it had a field day during the war with Draconia. But if you knew where to look, as I did, you could see where it had been. The Puppeteer enjoyed its brutal operations: the disassembly of the human form, sometimes with care and finesse; sometimes with all the subtlety of a dull hacksaw.

And always – the staring eyes of its victims. Eyes that were filled with pain and terror; eyes that showed every bit of the horror the Puppeteer had inflicted upon their owners before their deaths.

I had hunted it here, to this small frontier world of Gondovan, with its pink cotton-candy sky and arid deserts. To Gondalla Spaceport, much like any other spaceport; a place for people to get lost and die.

And now its hands were at my throat, and it taunted the only man who could save me. ‘Can you do it?’ it said, with the voice of its host. ‘Can you save her before I finish her? Before all that’s left is barely recognisable as once human?’

‘Well,’ said the Doctor, a wide grin spreading across his face, ‘I’d like to think I can.’

‘Hello, I’m the Doctor,’ he’d said to me, his voice rich and sonorous, when we’d met at the Royal Gondovan Hotel just seven

short hours previously. He was dressed in loose, comfortable

clothes, with a wide, floppy hat jammed on top of his curly, brown hair, and an absurdly long multicoloured scarf that trailed behind him on the ground.

His companion was a handsome man in his early twenties, with deep, sunken grey eyes that gazed soulfully at me. His face was bruised under the eyes, and there were scratches and contusions on his cheeks and forehead. With his slightly shaggy hair, I thought he looked like a college student a couple of days after a dust-up. He wore old-fashioned blue jeans and what had to be a replica of an antique piece of clothing: a black T-shirt that read ‘The Killers – Glastonbury 2005’.

‘This is my friend, Oliver,’ the Doctor said. ‘We’re here to help you.’

A small thrill ran through me, and I found myself reaching forwards a hand in greeting, but stopped myself. ‘Annajin Valentin, investigatory archivist. How the hell can you help me?’

The Doctor beamed at me. ‘Well, Annajin – lovely name, do you mind if I call you Anna? That’s good. Anna, I believe we may have some vital information for you.’

We stood in the hotel lobby, beneath the clear glasteel sky roof. It was midday, and Gondovan’s small sun hung listlessly in the sky above. As I was heading towards the lift, these men had stepped towards me, almost like old friends.

And, in a way, I almost felt like they truly were old friends, the Doctor immediately instilling a sense of comfort in me, and Oliver... there was something about his eyes. Something that told me that here was a good man, a good man who felt things perhaps too deeply.

Before the Doctor could say anything more, Oliver spoke in low, steady tones. ‘We know about the Puppeteer.’

A chill ran through me, despite the warmth of the hotel.

‘Yes,’ agreed the Doctor, his large eyes staring at me unblinkingly. ‘We’ve been following it too.’

Their investigation had taken much the same course as mine: hopping from system to system, always one step behind the Puppeteer. I didn’t pry too deeply into what had set them on its trail; I gathered that someone they’d known had been one of its victims.

With what 1 knew myself, that alone was almost enough for me.

But still I kept my own connection to the case from the Doctor and Oliver; I held on to it fiercely.

If I told them, it would mean letting go of my own burning hate towards the Puppeteer, allowing someone else to share it. And I needed that hate. That hate brought me across the galaxy to this

rotten little spaceport. That hate would make it possible for me to do what had to be done.

The Doctor and Oliver Day had been on Gondovan three days longer than me, investigating the latest murders that bore the brutal,

terrible hallmarks of the Puppeteer's insatiable need to destroy the human form.

They'd managed to liaise with the spaceport police, and had even managed to view some of the corpses. Through that liaison, they knew of my impending arrival.

Their investigation hadn't gone completely smoothly, however, as Oliver's condition attested.

When I asked what had happened to him, Oliver touched the bruise under his right eye gingerly, offering a wry smile. 'The Doctor got me wandering, poking around some bars, trying to get information. I guess this bloke thought I was checking out his girlfriend or something!' He shook his head ruefully. 'So he followed me when I left the bar and started on me in an alley.'

'I normally disapprove of violence,' said the Doctor, as he sat at the desk and pored over my notes. His eyes never even glanced upwards. 'But Oliver made quite a good showing of himself. Didn't you, Oliver?'

The younger man shrugged. 'I suppose. I left in one piece! But it was so odd. He was so brutal... like an animal when he came at me. That's probably how I was able to knock him out so easily and get out of there. The bloke just wasn't thinking straight.'

'That must be it,' agreed the Doctor. 'Anna, tell me – what do you know about the Puppeteer?'

I stood at his right side and spoke nervously, almost as if I felt I had to prove my investigatory skills to these men I'd barely just

met. ‘We’ve traced the Puppeteer as far back as 1976, on old Earth. A place called Glasgow, in –’

‘Scotland, yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘I know it quite well.’ He looked up at me and smiled, piercing me with that laser-beam stare of his. ‘I had a lovely haggis there once.’

‘You had a... haggis?’

‘I had a haggis. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?’

I looked towards Oliver, confused. He just grinned and shrugged his shoulders. It hit me then: these two men were comfortable enough with the situation that they could joke about it. Somehow this made me feel a bit more at ease myself. Maybe I could tell them the truth. Maybe I needed this to happen.

‘I’m afraid I don’t know what a haggis is,’ I said, my mouth beginning to twitch in a small smile.

‘Ah.’ The Doctor’s face fell slightly. ‘It’s just as well. A lot of

people can’t even mention Scotland without a haggis coming into it You were talking about the Puppeteer?’

The Doctor’s abrupt changes of subject were beginning to seem normal to me, so I changed tack with him easily. ‘The Puppeteer had evidently been hibernating inside a comatose patient at what they called a sanatorium. The patient’s lifespan had apparently been extended beyond normal expectancy for that era, probably by hosting the Puppeteer.’

‘Okay, when you say “beyond normal expectancy”, exactly what

are you talking about?' asked Oliver, stepping closer to me.

'He was apparently 111 years old when the Puppeteer creature finally left him,' I said.

'Now, that's interesting,' said the Doctor. 'Why did it remain in him so long?'

'The patient was kept dosed with high levels of sedatives for years. When the drugs stopped flowing, the patient woke up – and so did the Puppeteer. We're very fortunate to have a first-hand account of the incident, by the nurse who inadvertently stopped the sedatives.'

'You've been very thorough with your research,' the Doctor said. 'Very good. But why now? The Puppeteer has been hopping from world to world in the Human Empire for centuries. Why are you so determined to find it now?'

'Because,' I said, and the words burst out of me along with great whooping sobs, as I felt my emotions wrench free of their moorings. 'It's in my brother Sukhrit now. It's my brother...

'Oh, God, it's in my brother!'

Oliver stayed with me in the hotel room. He sat at the edge of the bed and calmly talked to me of things he had seen, things he had done in his travels with the Doctor. It sounded like so much fantasy to me, but it made me feel better.

Through the glasteel door leading to the balcony, I could see the ships arriving and departing the spaceport against the late afternoon sky. Freighters, luxury cruisers, tiny scout craft. The Doctor was out there somewhere, getting some sort of device from his ship...

something he'd claimed, with a twinkle in his eyes, would help us remove the Puppeteer from my brother.

'I've lost everything,' I told Oliver. 'Coming here has used the last of my savings, and my boss won't be happy. I've broken every rule in the book.'

'Just like Jack Bauer,' he murmured.

'Like who?'

He grinned and shrugged. 'Just... someone you remind me of.

He's always breaking all the rules in the book. It's pretty cool to know people still think in those terms, actually!'

'Well, of course we do,' I said, not for the first time wondering what he was on about. 'A good cliché is evergreen.'

He laughed. 'You just did it again!'

'Dammit!' I laughed too. Which made him laugh even more.

'The thing is, though – breaking all the rules in the book actually tends to get results,' he said. 'When you capture the Puppeteer, you'll be a hero to your agency. I bet you'll not only keep your job, you'll be promoted!'

'How do you know that?' I said, irritated by his positivism. 'Is that what happened to this Jack Bauer?'

'Oh, you get a sense for this sort of thing when you travel with the Doctor,' Oliver said. 'I've seen stuff like this play out before. I think you're going to be a hero, Anna.'

'And what about you? The two of you are helping me.'

‘You don’t even have to mention us. In fact, we’d prefer that you didn’t.’ I stared into Oliver’s brown eyes. I saw no hint of deception or pity there. He meant what he said. ‘Who are you?’ I asked.

Oliver stood and walked to the balcony window, where his slender form was turned into a silhouette by Gondovan’s setting sun. He faced away from me, touching a hand to the glasteel.

‘I’m… a traveller,’ he said. ‘I’ve already told you.’ The tenor of his voice had thickened.

‘You and the Doctor… you’re more than just travellers. There’s something about you…’

He laughed. What should have been a joyful sound was tinged with bitterness. ‘All I can tell you is that I’m a very long way from home.’ I looked down and idly ran a finger along the orange bedspread. ‘Is there – is there someone waiting there for you?’ I meant it to sound casual. I wanted it to sound casual. But I hoped the answer was no. I had found myself liking Oliver Day. Speaking with him made me feel better, more natural… more myself than I had felt for a long while, since the Puppeteer had turned my world upside down.

I’d given up so much of my life to track down the Puppeteer, and then seemingly out of spite, it had taken Sukhrit, to taunt me. That had become the core of my world, everything I could think of. But Oliver reminded me of the way things used to be.

He sighed then, and dropped his hand from the window. I felt a pang of disappointment as he said, ‘Yeah, there is. Her name’s Chloe.’

‘Have you… known her long?’

He turned to me, a wry smile on his face as he thought of her.

‘See this T-shirt? The Killers – we met at this gig! God, that was a good day.’

‘Can’t you go back to her?’

Oliver shook his head ruefully. ‘Oh, I wish it worked that way with the Doctor. He has his own agenda; I don’t really have any say in the matter. But he promises me that when I see her again, it’ll be as if almost no time passed for her.’

‘Doesn’t that help at all?’ I asked, trying to give what I hoped was a reassuring smile, although so much of what he said didn’t make any sense to me.

He snorted and turned back towards the window. ‘No,’ he said curtly. ‘Not really. What does it matter if she hasn’t changed? I have! I’ve seen things that I can’t even explain. I’ve travelled from ancient Persia to a planet where the water talked. Talking water! How do I tell her about that? How do I convince her I haven’t gone completely mental?’

There was an angry tinge to his voice, and I regretted having opened this line of conversation. I barely knew this man and it seemed I’d touched a deep nerve. He obviously had his own demons, just as I did. The idea saddened me; I just wished I could help him somehow.

‘Well,’ I said with what I hoped was just enough optimism, ‘you don’t sound… mental… to me.’

Oliver spun around, and I gasped. I would swear I was looking at a different man. His eyes seemed ablaze with anger, and his posture had become rigid, threatening. ‘We’re travellers in time and space,’ he spat, approaching me. ‘We’re do-gooders. We fix things that don’t need to be fixed. But he can’t get me home.’

I jumped away from the bed and began moving towards the room’s entrance. ‘Oliver – what’s wrong? What’s got into you?’

He laughed, a nasty, bitter sound filled with contempt. What’s got into me? What’s got into me? Oh, Annajin, you should know. It’s been so hard – hiding myself inside this pathetic child of another time, with his mind full of *24* and *Neighbours* and fruit smoothies and Selly Oak. Never allowing a moment to think of himself, but always of others, of others, of others... hero-worshipping a philanthropic Time Lord of all things.

‘But you – you had to remind him of his sweet little Chloe. She looks like you, but he wouldn’t tell you that. I would, though! There’s so much loneliness inside him, and loneliness turns to misery, and misery turns to anger, and I can do so much with anger.

‘Oh, this is delicious. Face-to-face with my hunter and you didn’t even realise it. I ruined your brother Sukhrit, and moved into this cretin in that alley... and now he’ll be the ruin of you.’

130

I was alone with the Puppeteer.

I began backing towards the door, keeping my eyes locked on the Puppeteer as it advanced on me, playing Oliver’s body all too

expertly. The words on his T-shirt leered at me…

The Killers.

'Please,' I said. 'Please stop. Oliver, are you in there? Can you hear me? Oliver!'

'Oh, he can't hear you,' the Puppeteer chuckled. 'He's too busy screaming inside the little corner of his mind where I've put him.'

There was nothing in the room that I could use as a weapon. Nothing I could easily reach, at least.

The Puppeteer held up its forefinger and waggled it at me in admonishment. 'Ah, ah, ah, little Annajin. I can see what you're thinking. I know far more ways to kill you than you know ways to defend yourself. It's best just to accept the inevitable.'

I wanted to close my eyes as he advanced, but I couldn't. I wasn't going to give this creature the pleasure of tasting my fear.

And then I heard the door open. I glanced to my right and saw the Doctor rush into the room.

Moving so quickly it barely registered at the periphery of my vision, the Puppeteer took advantage of the moment and seized me by the throat. 'Can you do it?' it said, with the voice of its host. 'Can you save her before I finish her? Before all that's left is barely recognisable as once human?'

'Well,' said the Doctor, a wide grin spreading across his face, 'I'd like to think I can.'

In his right hand, the Doctor held aloft a small silver box. There were multicoloured LEDs dotting its surface, and a single red

button on its top. It appeared to have been cobbled together from a talented teenager's electronic hobby kit.

'What's that?' hissed the Puppeteer, with Oliver's voice.

'What's what?' asked the Doctor blankly.

I wanted to scream, *Don't play games, you fool*, but all that escaped my throat was a strangled 'Urk.'

Then comprehension dawned across the Doctor's face. His eyes bulged slightly, and his grin spread even wider. 'All! What's this, you mean?' He waggled the box.

'Oh, Doctor,' said the Puppeteer. 'I'm not impressed. You're a clown hopping the eons of the universe, stumbling into situations and escaping them by what small wits you possess. You've never faced anything like me.

'All of Oliver's dark side is mine... it feeds me, and in turn I amplify it. Once I'm done with the girl, I will rend you limb from

limb, but it won't just be me; it will be Oliver too, doing what he wants to do to you so very much. You've lied to him once too often. You've never had any intention of taking him home, and he hates you for it. And with his hands I'm going to pull the still-beating hearts from your chest.'

The Doctor suddenly looked concerned. The smile left his lips, and he pursed them instead in an almost comical moue of astonishment. 'Oh, my. I have to tell you, I'm not terribly fond of that idea.'

‘You speak as if you have a choice, Doctor,’ hissed the Puppeteer.

‘Oh, Oliver knows there’s always a choice,’ the Doctor said, his grin returning.

He pushed the button on the device, and the Puppeteer’s grip on my throat lost all its strength. Gasping for air, I watched as Oliver’s body slowly crumpled to its knees, and then over to its side.

‘What – what is that thing?’ I choked.

‘What, this?’ He patted the box fondly and then turned it around in his hand, almost as though he’d never seen it before. ‘It’s an ultrasonic skull resonator. It’s ideal for removing larger brain parasites, you know.’

‘Brain parasites?’

‘Oh, yes. It’s nothing more than a brain parasite that got ambitions above its station. It’s very long-lived, and probably quite frustrated at being nothing more than just a long black worm.’ He pointed down to Oliver’s unconscious form. ‘Rather like that one, as a matter of fact.’

I watched, fascinated and horrified, as a twenty-centimetre-long black worm, thick as a pen, slowly slithered out of Oliver’s nose, leaving a trail of blood and mucus.

‘Its race is very civilised, actually,’ the Doctor said. ‘They’re called the Vrund, and they exist in symbiosis with a humanoid race on a planet quite a long way from this part of the galaxy. This one probably crash-landed on Earth in the late nineteenth century. Its

original host must have died in the crash, so it bonded with a human. Unfortunately, the difference in biology drove it quite mad.'

The worm weakly raised its leading end, probing blindly in the air.

'That thing... wasn't just mad, Doctor. It was evil. How many people did it use to kill for pleasure? How many died? It's disgusting, it's filthy –'

'It's evil,' agreed the Doctor. 'I suppose you think I don't understand that.'

'The way you're blithering on, I don't think you do!'

He looked at me, and I suddenly saw so much age and pain in his

eyes. When I'd first met him, I'd thought he was in his mid-forties. Now I was certain he was far, far older than that. 'This Vrund was a miserably evil creature, but no more so than others I've had the misfortune of meeting. AII I can do... all you can do... is fight them. Hold them back. And have the best victory we can: continue living ourselves, and help others to do the same.'

The filthy thing was inching across the carpet now. Something inside me snapped. Almost without conscious thought, I ran towards it –

I stomped on it fiercely –

I ground it underneath my boot until there was nothing left, just a greasy mess and shreds of tissue. Almost like what it had left of its victims.

The Doctor's jaw dropped open weakly. 'That was a living being,

and you *murdered* it!'

'What were you just saying? About fighting them? I just did.' I stared into the Doctor's wide eyes. 'That... thing... was guilty of so much suffering and death over the centuries that it had to die. I didn't have a choice.'

'All things do come to an end,' he said somberly. 'I suppose... perhaps. Yes.' He nodded decisively, as though he had talked himself into it. 'I do understand, Anna. I may not agree that you didn't have a choice – as I've said, there's always a choice – but I do understand.'

There was only one question in my mind now. 'Where's my brother? If it was in Oliver, what happened to Sukhrit?'

The Doctor held up a tapered finger to his lips. 'Ah. Yes. That would be the man with whom Oliver had his disagreement. He's recovering in hospital. It's going to take a while before he recovers. The parasite... wasn't very kind to its hosts. It dug at their worst fears, their deepest primal urges, and dragged them into the light. And he'll remember everything that he did and felt during the Puppeteer's possession.'

I was aghast. 'You – you knew it was Sukhrit, and you didn't tell me? Why the hell wouldn't you tell me that? You listened to me pour my heart out and you couldn't even hint to me that he was alive?'

Startled, the Doctor just stared at me and said nothing.

'It never even occurred to you, did it?' Suddenly I felt so tired; the adrenalin, fear and anger I'd felt since the Puppeteer attacked

me was fading. My legs felt like rubber. The Doctor stepped towards me and caught my arm as I stumbled forwards. ‘You never even thought of telling me,’ I said, wrenching my arm away. ‘I don’t understand you. I don’t understand what you are.’

133

‘Anna,’ he said cajolingly. ‘There’s a bigger picture. Your brother’s going to require quite a bit of counselling and therapy before he’s well again. He needs you.’

And then another voice spoke. ‘Hey,’ Oliver said weakly, from the floor. ‘Can someone help me up? My head is killing me.’

The Doctor burst into Oliver’s hospital room with the largest grin I’d yet seen on his face.

‘Good news, then, is it?’ Oliver asked. From the chair beside his bed, I gripped his hand tightly.

‘Well, after two months, it had better be good news!’ the Doctor beamed. ‘The staff say you’ve recovered well enough to travel again. Oliver, it’s time to go.’

‘Back to the TARDIS,’ Oliver said, with a surprising lack of enthusiasm.

‘Well, yes – of course,’ said the Doctor. ‘But I’ve been thinking that perhaps you’d like to return home. See your family again. See the lovely Chloe.’

There was a pause.

‘I don’t think so, Doctor,’ Oliver said.

The Doctor's mouth dropped open, and he gaped almost comically. His eyes bulged and he removed his floppy hat, holding it against his chest. His gaze flickered to where my hand lay clasped with Oliver's atop the bedsheets, then met my eyes.

'It's not what you think,' I offered, refusing to look away.

'And what exactly am I thinking?' the Doctor asked. 'I don't even know what I'm thinking, so how could you?'

He paced back and forth, his long scarf a riot of colour against the stark clinical white of the room. 'You do realise what you're saying, of course,' he said, suddenly stopping, his eyes fixed on a spot approximately half a mile beyond the wall behind Oliver's head.

'How can I go back?' Oliver said, a note of resignation in his voice. 'I've seen things no one could ever understand; my mind has been used as a playground by something so evil it's made me feel like... like a piece of rotting meat. When Igo to sleep, I wake up screaming within ten minutes. I thought I was a good person, Doctor. But the things I see when I close my eyes...' He choked on the words. 'There was so much hate!'

I gently pulled my hand from Oliver's and touched his cheek.

'Are you okay?' He swallowed and nodded.

'Doctor,' he said, his voice breaking. 'I can't go back because I'm terrified of what I might do. I might hurt her. That parasite thing showed me all this darkness that's inside me. It amplified it. What if it happens again? What if it's done something... long-term

to me? What if I attack Chloe? Or my mum? I can't go back.'

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ the Doctor snapped. It was as if a storm had gathered behind those ancient eyes of his as he listened to Oliver. ‘Of course you can go back. We don’t have to go straight there – we can stop somewhere peaceful, somewhere you can relax –’ He stopped and clicked his fingers, his grin suddenly back. ‘I know just the place –’

‘No.’

The Doctor blinked. ‘No?’

‘I love Chloe. I’ll always love her. And… I can’t take that risk.’

‘Ahhhhh,’ said the Doctor. His gaze finally flicked down to meet Oliver’s. ‘I did promise to bring you home,’ he said. By the tone in his voice I knew it was his last attempt to change Oliver’s mind.

Oliver shook his head, a slight, sad smile on his face.

The Doctor nodded and stalked towards the door. As he opened it, he turned to me and said, ‘He’s a good man. Take care of him.’

Then he was gone.

That was six years ago. I’ve never seen the Doctor again. My brother and Oliver Day both recovered from their horrifying possession by the Puppeteer, and Oliver and I have become bonded. I’m working in security at Gondalla Spaceport, and Oliver helps in resettling refugees from the war on the Rim. We’ve found love together, of a sort, and when I look into his eyes I tell myself it’s not Chloe he sees, but me. Just me.

But I know I’m wrong. There’s still a darkness inside him, but it’s not what the Puppeteer left with him. It’s the final residue of his decision to stay. He still loves Chloe Elliot, the girl he left hundreds of

years ago and half a galaxy away.

I'm competing with her memory for his affection – but that's my own choice, and I think it must be easier to bear than his.

Oliver doesn't speak much of his time with the Doctor, but sometimes I catch him looking to the sky, the stars scattered like bright gems on black velvet.

I know he's remembering what it was like to travel among them with the Doctor, striding through time and space like laughing gods.

And in those moments I love him so fiercely I can feel my heart breaking.

135

Osskah

Gary Owen

An Adventure of Wingleader Osskah Longspan,

with the Eighth Doctor

I am happily abed when the boom comes. Post the boom there is a second of silence, then elements below squawking in alarm and some of the livelier voters trying to calm them. I don't move myself. I am ancient, and what I've learned of booms is that there's not much you can do about them. There's a boom and then you're dead, or you're not. No amount of flapping will make any difference. Best to just perch down, and wait – and seeing as I was already perched nicely, best for me to do nothing.

I drift then for a few minutes more and almost find my way back to sleep when the squawking comes again. 'Osskah! Osskah!'

A perk of dying is you can be rude as you like and no voter will dare pass comment, so I ignore them a bit more. The cries don't stop, though. 'Osskah! Osskah!' On and on and there's no way I'm getting back to sleep with all that.

'For the love of Tommy,' I shouts down at them, 'can't you let an old voter lie in peace?'

'Osskah,' comes back some chirpy voter, 'there's someone for saving you! It's a god, a god have crashed to earth.'

'Another one?' I says.

'But this one haven't killed nobody yet. We thought he might be a helping god more than a harming one.'

It strikes me that a god who has the whole sky to swoop round but still manages to slam his chariot into the side of a mountain probably isn't going to be much help to voter nor element, but I keep that thought strictly personal – such observations, I have noted, tend to dishearten one's flock. In a spirit of cooperation, I send down the lift thing that some helpful voters rigged up when my infirmity worsened enough to leave me no longer properly mobile, and wait for the god to ascend.

Tell truth, he doesn't look like much. He is bare, apart from fur growing out the top of his head, which flops and curls on either side

of his face, foolishly covering his ears. He has decked himself out in layers and layers of cloth to keep warm and decent: a black top layer that opens at the front, and which stretches in tubes to surround his forelimbs. Underneath this, a layer cut low at the front,

shiny and mottled and held shut with discs of bone-stuff, or claw-stuff. Then beneath this is a white layer, tight under his chin with another piece of brown-green cloth tied round it to make sure the

nakedness of his neck stays hidden. Both his eyes face forwards.

His ears appear to be entirely immobile. He is a blinking, soft-

looking, juicy-looking thing. Like prey.

‘You’re a god, then, are you?’ I says to him.

The thing picks himself out from the chair, stands on his two feet,

looks down, wobbles a bit, grabs a bit of bark for anchorage, bark

comes off, he scrabbles about, wobbles some more, eventually loses

balance altogether, and collapses down on his knees.

‘Because I must let you know,’ I tells him, ‘we already have a

god of our own, and he is much too grand to put in personal

appearances. So if you’ve come here with thoughts of recruitment,

you’ll find yourself pecking on stony ground indeed.’

‘Sorry,’ he says. ‘I’m not sure what you’re getting at. Still a bit

dizzy from the crash.’

‘Yeah,’ I says. ‘We heard a boom. That was you, was it?’

He nods.

‘Chariot all broken now, is it?’

‘Hurt,’ he goes, ‘but not broken.’

‘Oh, and I expect you’re going to be needing us to make various

kinds of sacrifice to fix it for you.’ That being the usual form with most of the littler gods who’ve swooped on us lately.

‘No,’ he goes. ‘My chariot’ll fix herself, give her a couple hours.’

‘What, no sacrifices?’ I says.

He shakes his head, and this somehow strikes me as meaning ‘no’.

I say to him, ‘You sure you’re a god?’

‘What exactly,’ he goes, ‘would happen if I told you I wasn’t a god?’

‘Well,’ I say, ‘mood I’m in now, we’d probably snap such limbs as you have then throw you to the elements for hunting practice.

Why do you ask?'

'No real reason,' he says. 'Idle curiosity. I am a god, and let's give it no further thought.'

'What's your call, then, god who doesn't want any sacrifices?'

'I,' he says, 'am a singular/unique/specific-healer/person of learning.'

I get a bit tricksy and pretend I didn't hear, so he has to say all

that again. This second time I don't watch him full-on, I make like I'm tracking something else, and glimpse what I can out of one eye. When I'm not really looking at him, the words I hear don't match up with the movements his mouth-hole is making. He must be making nonsense noises, and changing them to sense in my head. You'd think gods would be able to just speak sensible language and leave people's heads alone, but no. They prefer to go the showy route, always.

'What is it you want then, Specific-healer? If not sacrifices?'

Specific-healer looks at me with his weird flat face and same-way eyes, and does nothing for a bit. I find myself hopping from foot to foot and blinking, and for the first time feeling the least bit of properly godly fear of this creature.

'What do I want?' he goes.

'Yeah,' I says, 'as in, why did you come, godly one?'

'I crashed here,' he goes. 'I didn't mean to come here. You know

I crashed. Your people came and found me.'

And I realise that when Specific-healer says he crashed, he didn't just fly his chariot into a mountain due to drunkenness or inattention, which is as per usual for gods. He properly crashed, because he was out of control and had no choice.

'There is a storm in heaven,' he says.

'Oh, I know,' I tells him. 'We guessed as much from all the signs in the sky, and artefacts falling to earth which glow and sing with little-godly power.'

'My people were trying to bring the storm to an end,' he says. 'We failed. I fell to earth. You found me.' With that he sits down.

'Got anything to eat?' he says.

I call below and a couple of elements flutter up with five or six different kinds of meat and plant. They look on this god-thing sprawled on my floor, its limbs stuck out at angles that mean they should be broken. They're shocked, but thankfully long enough out of the ground that they didn't say nothing nor stare too much nor try to pick the god-thing up and throw it round the room for a chasing game. I send them away, before their hold over themselves fails, and they do something playful and disastrous.

'What are you going to do, then?' I says.

'Do?' he goes. 'Well, I suppose wait.'

Dying or otherwise, I am still given to watch the safety of the flock, and all the stories tell that when gods fly along with people, sooner than later the people end up getting clawed. Maybe the god

doesn't mean it to happen, but that's just the way it is. Gods are bad news for people: that's why White Tommy stays hidden. I says,

'Couldn't you do anything to help your chariot along? Get you on

your way faster?'

He looks up at me, and I think he's going to mark me for my

presumption but no. There's a stiffening in his arms like he's going to rise into action – but it barely lasts a beat, and then it's gone.

'My chariot's wiser than me in lots of ways,' he goes. 'Best I

don't interfere. Most likely I'll slow her down if I get my fingers in there.'

So he knows I want him gone, and he really doesn't care. That's

the way it is with gods. White Tommy cares what happens to us,

and that's what makes him worth tracking. Most of the gods

wouldn't fart our way on a still day unless it suited some plan of

theirs.

Specific-healer starts poking at the plants and meats now, trying

them none too happily. He takes a bite of rock crawler pipe and

says, 'What's this?'

I tells him it's rock crawler pipe but he doesn't understand. So I

show him a rendering of a rock crawler, and he goes, 'Right, a kind

of lizard thing.'

I goes, 'Yeah, and what you're eating there is its pipework, where

it breaks down all its own prey, which we reckon's the tastiest bit

'cause it's got remains of all the sliders and squeakers and head-

hole grubs the rock crawler's been swooping on.'

Specific-healer makes a noise like throat-clawed prey then spits out the half-chewed pipe. On instinct I catch the meat mid-air and pop it in my own mouth. You hear some say it's sacrilege to let a thing touched by a god fall to earth and though it's an old saying and not strictly what White Tommy holds by, I'm an ancient thing and I forget when I am sometimes. Specific-healer tracks me doing this and says nothing, so I guess I've done well keeping to the old ways before him.

He picks at the next bowl of meat.

'This is a bit better,' he goes. 'What's this?'

What he has chosen is as well a bit of rock crawler pipe, but swallowed, pre-digested and hawked up again by a mother for her young elements. It strikes that getting Specific-healer to eat anything might lift him and have him up and off and flying away in his chariot before the sum of all evil gets here, and so I says to him,

'What you are eating is the pulped fruit of the jooba-wooba tree. It grows plentifully nearby. We can get you more of that, if you want.'

'Yes,' he says, 'that'd be kind of you. And he reaches for my call, and can't find it. 'Forgive me,' he says, 'I'm rattled from the hard landing. I haven't asked your call.'

'Don't you worry,' I says, 'I've learned all about hard landings, these last few seasons.' I sing my call for him and he tries to sing it

back, but though he's making nonsense noises with his slimy soft mouthparts and reaching into my head to make it sense, he can't get my call right. He tries and tries, but gets nowhere close.

It seems to shadow him deeply, that he can't make my call.

'There we go,' he says to me. 'I can't even do that proper.'

'Never mind,' I tells him, 'call me Osskah. That's the noise the youngest elements make for me, before their call-pipes are properly formed. You can do that, can't you? You can say Osskah, can't you?'

'Yes, I can say Osskah,' he goes. 'I can do that, at least.' And he fixes me with these front-on eyes of his, and tracks me close. And it strikes that getting my call wrong is maybe only the worm's tip of the matter. All a sudden I'm so nervous I want to fold up like a new-born element and wait for mum to swoop home with a belly full of crawler meat to puke into my gaping mouth. The pain comes in my pipes and I figure if sprawling on the floor's good enough for a god, it's good enough for an old voter like me. So I perch down, and rest my belly on the ground. Not an elegant pose but one that pains me least.

'Do you hurt?' Specific-healer says.

'Yes, I do,' I tells him, 'but not to worry. My hurts won't continue much longer. Soon my elements will go back to the earth, and my thoughts to White Tommy for safekeeping till the end of days.'

'You've soared high to see the end of your days as such a little thing,' Specific-healer says.

'You've not quite tracked me straight there,' I tells him. 'I fret plenty about my end, but I fret for my flock. Things've been hard

these last few turns: bad winters, cold sun, signs in the sky and harming gods swooping in. And there's no young voter ready to take lead of the wing. So for myself, you're right, I've soared high and there's nothing I'd like more than a nice slow glide back to the earth. But for my flock, I'd see out a few more seasons yet.'

'Are you sure of that?' Specific-healer says.

'Sure I'm sure,' I tells him.

'Because you might not want to be leading the wing,' he goes, 'through what is to come. You might prefer to be spared that.' He says this and it's so quiet and clear that again I get a little shot of godly fear.

'Because I could help you,' Specific-healer says. 'This that's paining you now, I could take it out and fix it and you'd have lead of the wing for a few more seasons, at least.'

Now I'm an ancient thing. Tell truth is, I'm ready to fly easy in someone else's trail. Of course I'd worry about some young voter

plotting a path for the flock, but that's the way of things. Except now it's not. Now, according to Specific-healer the way of things is I get to stay in the lead, and stay there while we get through all sorts of roughness and chop.

I'm not ashamed to say, I need a moment or two to take in this new-looking territory ahead.

'Whatever storm is coming,' I tells him, 'I'll cut the wind so the flock flies safe in my trail. I'm not afraid.'

'You should be,' he says, and he pulls out a little straight silver stick, that makes a buzzy noise like jumper-song, and glows blue at

the end. ‘What’s that, then?’ I says. That buzzy thing?’

‘This is my nonspecifically/superlative steelclaw/construction device. It’s going to help me work out what’s paining you.’

‘How’s a steelclaw going to help that?’ I goes, a bit nervous of the noise.

‘I did say it was a superlative steelclaw,’ he goes, ‘and superlative in nonspecific ways. Now shut your chirruping and let me think.’ And he prods his superlative steelclaw in my guts and at my head, and makes all sorts of noises from his mouthparts that he doesn’t bother to put into sense in my mind, ‘cause these noises have more to do with breathing out heavily and breathing in sharply than making any kind of sensible song.

‘Hmmmmm,’ is sort of how he goes. ‘Wish the old girl was in better shape – she’d be a help now.’ And then he puts away his superlative steelclaw all a sudden and says, ‘Never mind, never mind, never mind. An ability to improvise is the key to all successful travelling light, and since I’m travelling light right now, improvising successfully is what I’m all about. Perhaps you could be so good,’ he says, ‘as to have brought to me such medical implements as are available, and I’ll see what I can do.’

I whistle up our cookman-herbalist with his potions, and our butcher-surgeon with her iron-hooks and steelclaws, and the Specific-healer makes more hmmmming noises and other heavy outbreaths.

‘Right,’ he says in the end, ‘there’s going to be no way of doing

this that isn't going to get messy.'

'That's fine,' I says, 'mess can be cleared. Plenty of elements for mess-clearing.'

'Also, the procedure is going to take a fair time and will introduce you to a whole new horizon of hurtfulness. I don't suppose,' he says, 'there's any chance your people have control over your body's pain-reporting systems?'

'No, we don't,' I says, 'but I do have a flask of triple-fermented thornberry juice which will knock me unconscious within about two

flaps of me emptying it down my pipes. Obviously I don't mind pain and would never take refuge in drink this way for myself –'

'Obviously not, no,' says Specific-healer.

'– but if there's some chance you'll be knocked off path by my screams and curses then I'll do what I must for the sake of your clear tracking.'

'That would be an idea,' he says, 'but I'm going to need you conscious, to tell me I've hooked up all your feeling bits proper.'

'Oh. Right, then,' I say. 'Maybe a tiny tot of the thornberry juice, then: just for luck.'

'You carry on,' he goes, but he's not really paying attention to me. He's got his superlative steelclaw, and he's rubbing it against one of the butcher-surgeon's steelclaws, and little bits of the butcher-surgeon's steelclaw are coming off almost in a powder, till its blade is thinner than a strand of leaper hair.

‘Perhaps best you don’t watch what I’m doing,’ he says. ‘Or even think about it. Try to think about something else entirely. Something nice.’

‘I see the track of your thought, but I have a feeling distraction’s gonna be hard to come by, with you putting claws and hooks in my pipes.’

‘Yes, I see that,’ says he.

He goes quiet for a moment. I can tell his hands are moving below my line of clearsight and every element in me wants to look full on, but I elect not to obey. On my belly is what feels like tickling, almost, and a sudden coldness, and my head goes a bit cloudy but still I keep staring straight into Specific-healer’s eyes.

‘You like the stars, Osskah?’

‘Oh, yes, I like them well enough,’ I says. I have a feeling he’s fetched this little wormful right out of my head. No need, cause I’ve got pictures and drawings of stars all over my place, but as I say that’s gods for you. The showy route, always.

‘Yes, I track how that must work. Your people, able to swoop where you please but, even if you reach the very edge of the sky, the stars still beyond you.’

‘You’ve been to the stars, lord?’ I know it’s weak-winged for me to be calling some little naked god my lord, but when a man’s got blades in your soft parts, you’re either polite or you’re a fool.

‘I’ve been to the stars many times, yes.’

There’s a definite stab in my guts, and I have to hold on hard not

to rake my claws across Specific-healer's face and throw him across the room. He waits for me to catch myself, then he carries on.

'And once,' he goes, 'I spoke to a star.'

'How so, lord?'

142

'There was a world in danger. Their sun had begun to die, suddenly, without warning. The people moved all their flocks to a new planet, a new sun – and that sun began to die. The people were exhausted from their trek between the stars, but they were a stubborn bunch, and they resolved to send as many they could to the next sun. So the youngest and the brightest were put on another chariot, sent to still another star – and, within a year, this star too began to flicker and dim. It was as if the stars were sickening, and these people carried the infection with them. Any star they migrated to, they would destroy. They were doomed. And so they called for me.'

'And did you cure the star sickness?'

'At first I didn't bother trying, because whoever heard of a star getting sick? Especially not some sickness that might be catching. No, I went looking for some enemy of these poor people, who had the means to mess around with several different stars' pipework. But there was nothing. Nobody who had the power to play around with suns, and who wanted to kill these people off.

'So then I started to think. A sickness is just a form of life. We call it a sickness because it interferes with us – it makes us ill. If it doesn't interfere with us, we call it a crawler, or a leaper, or a slider, or a person. Could there really be a star sickness– something living

right inside a sun?'

'I'm surprised you didn't think of that first,' I says. 'White Tommy lives right in the heart of our own sun, and he's very happy there indeed.'

'Yes...' says the Specific-healer. 'I'm sure he's got no complaints at all. It turned out the things living inside all three of these stars were making the stars burn cold, so the people on the planets froze.'

'And did you kill the sickness, and make the stars well?'

'Why would I do that?' he says. 'I'd never tracked anything that lived in a star before. I'm not saying the people on the planets didn't deserve saving. I'm just saying, all sorts of planets have people living on them. People are all over the place. But things that can live in stars – you don't track them too often.'

He stopped speaking for a moment, and really quick I was tracking a heavy, heavy coldness in my belly.

'As it turned out, things were much worse than I thought. These creatures that lived in the stars, they had spread with the people, but they were also spreading by themselves, much slower but much wider, floating through space. They would in the end turn the whole galaxy dark, and leave it too cold for any other creatures at all.

'So we decided we would have to do something about the star creatures. Not exterminate them all, but limit them to a single sun.

We found a way we thought would kill them, and were about to launch it at one of the infected stars – and the star started blinking at us.'

‘Blinking?’

‘On and off. In a signal. The star creature was becoming a thinking thing. And it had been watching us, and figured what we were up to. It knew we were trying to kill it, and it was begging us to stop.

‘My chariot learned the star creature’s language, and we realised the creature was barely an element, really just a hatchling. And it wasn’t that there were many creatures in the different infected stars. All the living things in each of the stars were part of one creature. Spread across three stars, the creature had grown big enough to think. If we let it grow into more stars, it would become cleverer and wiser. Every star in the galaxy would be part of one great mind. The creature said it would unlock all the secrets of the universe, if only I would let it grow.

‘I had to choose. I could kill the most wonderful creature in the galaxy – or I could let this star creature snuff out everyone else.’

‘Right,’ I says, ‘so you killed it, and that’s dead sad but what else could you do, really?’

‘No,’ he says.

‘No?’ I goes. ‘Then how come we’re still here? How come the stars aren’t all dead and cold?’

‘The thing is, Osskah, all the world we track is just one universe amongst billions, each existing next door and slightly up from and directly hypersouth of the other.’

Obviously I didn’t understand any of this, but it’s the kind of nonsense talk that lots of gods and even some of our more wing-

leading theologians indulge in, so I let it flutter by unclawed.

‘And most of these universes are no good for anything. Their numbers came out all unlucky, so they’ve got no atoms or no complex molecules or they’ve just not got enough gravity to pull themselves together. It can all go wrong in a billion equally boring ways, and all you’re left with is cold dark soup of matter and anti-matter, quietly wasting away over the giga-seasons. Then you’ve got a few universes good for life, and life has arisen in all of those, and in all of those life depends on having bright, shiny, healthy suns.

‘But I figured, if there are more universes than you can ever think about – surely there must be one that has suns, but is otherwise no good for other life. So I just had to sort through billions of universes till I found the right one, and we clawed ourselves a rift in space-time, and shoved the three living suns through. The star-thing had a 144 universe to call its own.’

‘And what about the people?’ I goes.

‘The people?’ he says.

‘Who’d lost their suns. Who you’d been called to save.’

‘I’m sure,’ he goes, ‘someone will have looked after them. I went through to the new universe, with the star-thing. I watched it grow, till it was living in every one of a trillion suns. I watched ripples of light washing across galaxies, and I was watching the thoughts of a god. Not a little god like me, Osskah, but a true god. I stayed for 19 million seasons, watching and learning, and gradually I could figure just the merest flavour of what the creature was thinking, from the play of light across its universe. Sometimes the creature would remember me, and try to speak to me directly, but it was no good. It

had moved beyond me. I was like a fresh hatchling, trying to take in the work of the world's greatest poet. Everytime it spoke to me, I

wept in frustration at what little I could understand: and then wept again out of joy, that such a creature could exist.

'And then a call came from home. In our universe, just seven

seconds had passed. There was another emergency, and I was

needed.'

Specific-healer stops, brings his superlative steelclaw up to his

face and fiddles with it. The light on the end glows with a blue that is almost white. I don't look – but in my belly, now I feel heat, and I smell fleshsmoke.

'As I made to leave that universe, I saw a great wave, a pulse of

deep-red blossoming between the suns. I asked the star-thing what

had happened. It told me – it had found a mate.'

Specific-healer switches off his superlative steelclaw, and the

blue light dies. He sits back, and with his mouthparts makes a

movement I take to be a smile.

'That's as much as I can do, I think. How are you feeling?'

'I'm all right, I figure.'

'Good,' he says. 'You were very brave through all that.'

'I tried my best.'

'Yes, you did,' Specific-healer says. 'And so did I.'

'I am grateful as a worm-fed hatchling, lord.'

'Osskah, listen,' he says. 'Without proper tools, without knowing

more about your people's internal workings, without even my

chariot in fit shape to help...'

And then he stops himself.

‘I’m so very sorry, Osskah. I couldn’t save you. I tracked like I could, but it was beyond me.’

He gets up, and walks over to a corner, and just sits down again, sort of curled up against the wall.

145

For a bit I don’t know what to say. Though I’m not one who falls for little gods, this particular god had a way about him made me take he’d do what he said he could. But all a sudden that way had gone, and there was this small, featherless thing, crouched against my nest wall, shivering.

Across my belly I could feel warm, raised scar lines, and it made me shiver to think of this lonesome god’s hands meddling with my pipework. ‘Won’t do no harm, then, to have a little bit more thornberry juice to steady the system,’ I says. Specific-healer doesn’t say nothing, so I pour myself a tot. ‘You’ll not have one yourself?’

‘May’s well,’ he goes, and takes a tot of the stuff, sinks it down and holds out his cup for more. His clawless hands’re so tiny he’s to hold his cup with both of them, and raising it up to me he looks like a little element come to his voting ceremony, asking for Osskah’s word and blessing. I pour him a shot more and he sinks that one too.

‘May’s well,’ he says, ‘may’s well just sit and drink this stuff with you. Let my chariot fix herself then fly off and save herself. Maybe someone’ll be a fit master to her, doesn’t look like I am.

Can’t even fix one little broken creature who needs to live a couple more seasons for the sake of the flock. Can’t even do that.’ And it’s like he can’t think of a word then, or he can’t find the word in my talk, ‘cause his mouthpart makes movements, but nothing comes in my head.

I sit quiet and still for a while, and have a little think and let the god sip his cup. Then when I’ve thought what to say, I start speaking again. ‘Yeah,’ I says, ‘I felt like you do often enough. All these hard seasons gone past, a lot of times I wished the voters would choose someone else to lead the wing, or I wished I was just a little element, new sprung from the ground, or I wished I was an old bird, too scrambled for voting and going back to play with the elements once more. I wished all those things. But, in the end, it came to me why I was the bird in front.’

‘Pray tell, wise Osskah,’ he says. ‘I’m dying to hear. Just like you’re dying to tell, I suppose.’ He laughed a bit at that, but I didn’t track it, on purpose.

‘Because it’s an easier path, in the end. It seems hard ’cause it’s you that’s got to cut the wind and make a path for your flock: but it’s easier, because you got the things to do and the choices to make. The ones that follow, they fly your trail, fearing the worst and hoping for the best. You’re the leader, you’re busy with the what and the how, and you don’t have time to worry on the why and the what if.’

‘Yeah, well, you might have to forgive me,’ he says, ‘but I think

maybe the whys and what ifs I have to worry on are a little grander

than the ones that might trouble you.' I could tell the thornberry juice was having an effect, even though his pipework was not a person's but a god's, because his speech was getting cloudy in my head, and more and more there was this surety thing in his face that hadn't been there before.

'Well, I'm sure you're right about that. But we been through hard times ourselves. Only a hundred seasons ago, White Tommy came down from the heart of the sun and introduced himself to us. Before then we followed Red Tommy. Red Tommy said whenever someone flew against your track, you should claw them to show your track was the right way. Following Red Tommy meant we was clawing each other almost every day and night, sometimes whole flocks rising up to fight. Then White Tommy come, and said if someone flew against your track, you don't claw them, but you stand ready to take a clawing, to show your track is the right way. And lots of the people saw straight this would lead to a lot less clawing overall, so we switched to White Tommy's way and kindly requested Red Tommy to depart.

'But there was one flock held to Red Tommy's way. Anybody disagreed with them, they got to clawing pretty fast. And so when they came up against the White Tommy flocks, only one thing happened.'

'The White Tommy flock got clawed, and the Red Tommy flockgot their way?' says Specific-healer.

'Well, that's the least gruesome form of words for putting it

across, so that's the way we'll choose. The Red Tommy flock went about clawing and killing, with none of the other flocks ready to claw them back. This went on for season after bloody season, till finally there was only the Red Tommy flock left. All the other flocks was killed, right down to the last element and hatchling. And the elder of the Red Tommy flock thought he was the wisest bird ever to take to the skies, for now they had the whole land and sky to swoop in, and all prey that walked or hopped or crawled was theirs.'

'They sound like a lovely bunch of birds,' Specific-healer says.

'They were foolish birds, and not lovely at all,' I answers.

And then all a sudden Specific-healer stops and looks up, and he sends a sneery smile my way. He says, 'That was you, wasn't it? Your lot were the Red Tommy flock, who slaughtered your brothers and sisters.'

And I hang my head, as I have done all these seasons when I remember what passed when I was a young bird, and didn't know nothing about the turning of the world, and was tough enough to claw anyone who tried to tells me better.

147

'That was us, yes,' I says. 'And that was me, their leader. And almost the day the slaughter was finished, and so pleased and proud of ourselves, we learned what our error had been. Half our elements came down with spitfever. And the herbalist-cookman came to me and said, "Osskah, the young elements is dying, what we gonna do?" And I said, "Dying of spitfever? How come?" Every element

gets spitfever, and every element gets better. I had it when I was just an hour hatched, and I'm the toughest bird in skies.

'But, of course, in the really old days, elements used to die of spitfever all the time. Then a herbalist-cookman in the North Cliffs flock made a paste that cured it, and more of everyone's elements lived. But now the North Cliffs flock was gone. We'd killed their fullgrown then had sport dropping their hatchlings into the sea, and swooping on them if they looked like swimming.

'And it carried on like this. With each new day, there was something we'd taken for granted that now we'd lost. Something we used to trade with other flocks, some knowledge only other flocks had, some trade other flocks were better at and we'd long since given up practising. After ten seasons the flock was a third of what it had been, even though we had the whole of the land and sky to take prey from. And for those of us that lived, all we had was to think about what we'd done. How our own hatchlings were dying, and it was all our own fault, 'cause we'd killed so many others.

'And it was then I was gladdest to be leader. The rest of the flock had to mourn the lost, and ponder on how the loss had come. I was spared. I had no time to mourn. I had to be planning and tacticking hard as I could, just in hope that the flock could survive. Things like, should we nurse our spitfevered hatchlings, or should we let them die quick? We couldn't spare to waste food on hatchlings as were going to die anyway – but it was sapping the hearts of voters, not to even try to keep their young alive. So what? What to do?'

'What did you do?' says Specific-healer.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I tells him. ‘We did the wrong thing. Either way was the wrong thing. But we’re here. We lived. And even though voters say to me, “I wouldn’t like to have to make a choice like that, Osskah,” the voters are wrong. Better to get to be the one who chooses, I think. Lucky to be the one who chooses, and not to be the little one who has choices made for him.’ I watch the god for a bit. ‘Don’t you agree, Specific-healer?’

Specific-healer says nothing. Holds out his cup for a shot more.

So I go on.

‘It came to me that half the problem was we didn’t think we should survive, after what we’d done to our brothers and sisters. And so I requested Red Tommy to depart and asked White Tommy

to take us as his own. I was expecting we’d scourged and punished for what we’d done, but White Tommy said he wouldn’t punish us no further, as we had so much punished ourselves. And he said he was willing to be our guide and our light, and give us right and reason to survive. He said for us to remember that nothing is lost. When you fly high and peer down at the long nun of the world, you see everything that was leads to everything that is. So all the other flocks were with us, ’cause the loss of them was what made the world we lived in.’

‘Well, I hope that was some comfort to you,’ says Specific-healer.

‘I don’t know,’ I says, ‘it’s a bit theological for me. But White Tommy is a practical god. He sends lift to them that flap their

wings. So now we are a gathering flock, a collecting flock, a remembering flock. We swoop the skies looking for all trace of the brothers and sisters we lost. We find their remains, their nests, their tools. We remember their stories, their science, their jokes, their silliness. And we put it all here.'

And I show him the book. He stands, and comes over, and struggles to lift its great covers.

'And this has kept me going. The tending of the flock, the writing of the book. It was an easier path, to be the bird charged with saving us all. I am glad I had these tasks for my mind and muscles. Because, without them, the mourning would have been too much. I could never have borne it.'

He turns the pages of the book, slowly, his two front-on eyes scanning across its writings and drawings and remembering. I can tells his god's tricks must be making it into sense for him, because a couple of times at the saddest bits he has to stop, and shake himself down, and wipe at the soft not-quite-a-beak above his mouthparts.

I says nothing, and I let him read.

Even before dawn, rowdy elements and respectful voters are gathered outside, calling up to hear news of what the god has told me, whether the god has saved me, and wanting me to guide and lead, as ever.

I walk out, and the lift contraption is raised up to me. I think, no, not this day. I spread my wings out full, and glide down to meet my brothers and sisters. A stab in my shoulder warns me that with this one swoop I have probably flown my last, but I make sure no sign of the pain leaks through in my speech or manner. I tell them the

good news: the god required no sacrifice of us, and had now departed. He came with a message that our efforts at gathering and remembering were pleasing to White Tommy, and we should carry

them on as best we could. And he came with a warning that hard times were likely to stay, and we should set aside seed, salt what prey we could, save fuel, preserve and prepare, and make ourselves ready for wind and chop.

The people, I know, were hoping for better news. But they let no sign of their disappointment leak through. As they spread wings to set about their tasks, there is a noise like the very skin of the world being torn in two.

'No trouble, no trouble,' I tells them. 'It is only the sound of the god departing. His chariot is not so quiet as our feathers, my friends.'

They laugh. Not because what I have said is funny, but because they are worried, and I have given them chance to laugh – and given chance, my brave flock will always turn fear into laughter. I love them for their courage, and I hate being divided from them by what I know. For what I know is this: our world is ending. A rift was opened in space. Our world, and our sun, has fallen through into the universe next along. This universe is dead, and empty, and claws at the very makings of life. Specific-healer thought he would be able to close the rift before it swallowed us – but he wasn't fast enough. Already the stars are going out, and soon we will fly into a night that is absolutely dark. The moment we passed over, this new

universe's pipework began to unravel the stuff that makes up our

sun, our earth, and our bodies. It is too late to save us. Before long it will be as if we never existed at all.

Specific-healer was weeping as he told me this. I found myself

laying a gentle claw on the shoulder of a god.

Many times over these hard years I have sung that nothing is lost,

nothing is lost, nothing is ever lost. Before now I have never known what those words might mean. I sang them because they were a

comfort for the dying and the left behind.

Before he left, I gave Specific-healer our book of gathering and

remembering. It will survive the end of our world, and the end of all of us.

I look up into the deep blue before-dawn sky. For a beat there is a

clawpoint of light, just across from where the winter latestar should be. Specific-healer's chariot punching between the universes, letting a moment of starshine leak through from the other side. A last

goodbye from the little, lonely god, and from our home.

Nothing is lost. I will try to believe that.

150

Piecemeal

James Swallow

An Adventure of Saya Rohar,

with the Fifth Doctor and Vizlor Turlough

I've done my best to assemble what I could find and place it together in a kind of coherent order. It has been difficult to be sure of the placement of some elements. The damage from the ionic plume was

quite severe, and we lost a lot of systems, including the ship's redundant memory cores. Some of this is personal recollection, some of it comes from

material I managed to salvage from the records that were still intact, and other places... I can't vouch for the veracity of everything. It seems right this way. Don't ask me to give you any more than this. This is all I have. Just pieces.

Personal diary, Technician Saya Rohar. Five days after the incident.

Cumil got most of the damage on the outer hull repaired, and everyone seems to be breathing a little easier now without the threat of another explosive decompression looming over our heads. The drones have stopped crying, which is a blessed relief. The doctor, especially, was quite jolly about the whole thing. He helped me reconstruct some of the navigational logs and we went ahead and programmed a short hyperspace jump. Nothing much, just a parsec or so to make sure we were still capable, but it went fine and so we'll be going into a full transition next shipday. I couldn't find anything in the chaos of the memory banks that resembled anything like a destination code, but the doctor pulled it out of thin air. We'll be in N-space for a few more lights, and then with luck we'll make orbit at a world called Soloto. The name means nothing to me, but the doctor says that's nothing to worry about. I'm glad we have him here. If he hadn't been protected inside his lab pod, the energy pulse would have affected him too.

That's a terrifying idea, isn't it? That we would have woken up, every single one of us, every crewmember, every bio-data system and dronemind, all of us missing the last year of our memories. But at least one of us didn't. The doctor, despite the pressure that's on 151 him now, helping us all find our way, he's rising to it. He's a curious person, full of odd turns of phrase and he dresses

eccentrically – how he got away with bucking uniform regulations so blatantly I don't know, but that's hardly important right now. I shudder to think what might have happened if he hadn't been isolated from the plume. We'd be a whole starship full of amnesiacs. Funny thing is, I can't remember his name.

Actually, he's not the only one. I said 'one of us' but there's also the doctor's assistant, Turlough. I don't like him very much. He keeps watching me like he's waiting for me to say something, do something. I don't know what. Turlough was inside the blue research pod as well, according to the doctor, but he seems to have been affected by the memory loss at least tangentially. In the mess hall I asked him a simple question, just something trivial about what quanta he was from and he said he didn't know. How could you not remember that? I've lost over a solar year of who I am and I still know. He's odd. I find him creepy. Sometimes I get the feeling he knows something about me that I don't. Oh, Terra, I hope it's not something sordid. Perhaps we copulated during the voyage and he's upset I don't recall it? I hope it isn't that. He's really not on my vector.

Cumil came by my habitat just before I started coding this. He was asking again about what we were going to do with the command crew. When the ion storm hit the bridge pod, it ripped the compartment open like an egg cracking and, from what I could tell, there are at least five people whose bodies are simply gone. Vented to space or flashed to ash by the plume. When the force field collapsed they must have been dead in seconds. We recovered a few

remains, but they were in a sorry state. The only way we know that those people up there were in charge is because none of the rest of us is wearing officer's braids. I suppose we should have a service, but without the memory banks there's no way to know what denomination the memorial should be. And if we do it wrong, the company is liable to be sued by any relatives. No. I'm not going to take that responsibility. We'll go to Soloto and let the people there deal with it.

GalMeg Interstellar Registration Codex 2832/FDSW/456.

Survey Vessel C-83 *Pride of Sheboygan*, Type Nine variant Orca-Class hull, transgalactic rating, stutterwarp hyperdrive capability.

Launched from Thessalon IV on Mahnday Juno 4teen, 15,643 (Oldterra Calendar).

Crew of thirty oxynitrograde humaniforms, ten synthetic intelligence helots (ref. L32S: limited acumen drones, class gamma 152
and below). Current owners registered as The Iapara Investiture (Corpoglomerate with full granted planetary sovereign nation status – see ref. P75C: suspension of ethical practice approved).

Mission parameters logged as *quote* wide-ranging search and recovery operations with specific emphasis on the discovery and exploitation of extrasolar and/or planetborne xenoflora/forna in areas of biochemical, military, medical and related value *unquote*.

Last known location (logged at 76:37:54 Vega Mean Time)

exiting ecliptic plane System Kappa Theta X, NGC 3113.

Personal diary, Technician Saya Rohar. Six days after the incident.

I was in the mess hall hunting down a bulb of recaff – jump transits always make me thirsty – when the doctor entered. He seemed to forever be wearing an expression halfway between affable concern and slight bafflement. I got a grin from him and he sat down next to me. I told him we'd made the insertion without incident and he seemed pleased.

'How are you feeling, Saya? Has anything come back to you?'

'No,' I replied, sipping at the warm drink. It was a poor synthetic, but since the incident the ship's fabricators – like most of the non-critical systems – were running at less than optimal capacity. 'It's just a big blank, Doctor. A year, cut out of my head.'

He nodded, with a sympathy that made me wonder if he'd ever experienced the same thing. 'And not a clean cut either, I'd imagine. Memory is a holographic thing, Saya. You can't cut and edit it like a strip of tape. Memories are more like plants in a garden, roots intertwining with one another. Pull one out and you make an awful mess.' He was silent for a moment then, with more seriousness than I'd seen him show before, he asked me this: 'What do you remember about your mission? On this ship, I mean. Do you remember what you were doing out here?'

'What *we* were doing out here, you mean?' I noted. That wasn't the first time I'd had to correct him. The doctor frequently spoke as if he was an outsider; to be honest, I'd lost my recall of him joining the crew. I assumed it had taken place at some point after we had left Iapara's central plexus at the start of the Pride's cruise. It

happened, from time to time. Supply ships brought new crew, rotated out the old. Anyway. I told him the truth. We were looking for new life, for uncatalogued xenoforms. Ours was a mission of pure research, nothing more. We were out here to learn, just like it said in the company's e-brochures.

Or, at least we had been a year ago. Orders from Central did alter as missions evolved. The company was known to make demands if

something of interest came up. Sometimes, very strident demands.

He seemed happy enough with that answer. 'A lot can change in a year,' he said carefully. 'People cut off from home can grow...'

The doctor was searching for the right words. 'Distant. Callous, even. What might have seemed like anathema to a person at the start could be easily dismissed after 12 months in the void with little or no external contact.' He sighed. 'Humans are like that. Social animals, you see? Corral them inside a drab and featureless tin can, make them do repetitive tasks, deprive them of wind in their hair and grass under their feet for weeks on end and they harden around the edges. Sensitivity fades. Boredom breeds unkindness.'

I had to laugh. 'Doctor, there's nobody on the Pride who is anything like that.'

'No,' he replied. 'Not now.'

Then Turlough came in looking for him, and I used the interruption to leave.

Mess Hall Security Monitor Playback – Time Index 4326:85:93.

<Audio Only>

Technician Rohar – I should be going. There are some... Diagnostics that require my review. I'll see you later, Doctor... Turlough...

Male#A (ident 'Turlough') – Bye. [Pause.] I don't think she likes me.

Male#B (ident 'Doctor') – Whatever gave you that idea?

Turlough – The fact she won't look me in the eye for more than ten seconds. That she avoids me at every turn.

Doctor – She's had her memory partially drained, Turlough. It's terribly unsettling for her... For all of them. You could try to be

more sympathetic.

Turlough – [Unintelligible.]

Doctor – Well, that's as maybe. The fact is, after the first feeding these people lost any clue as to who or what put them in this

situation, and it would be unconscionable for us to just leave them

in this sort of a bind. The matter would get worse, until eventually none of them would remember anything.

Turlough – Then someone pushes the wrong button or something

and the whole ship explodes...

Doctor – Exactly.

Turlough – [Exhales.] Wouldn't that be fitting, though? After what they did? Sort of poetic justice, maybe?

Doctor – It's not up to you to make that kind ofjudgement.

Turlough – Oh. Right. But it is up to you, is that what you're saying?

Doctor – Just follow my lead, Turlough. In a couple of days, this 154

will all be over and no one will have to suffer for it.

Turlough – Suffer any more, you mean.

Doctor – Someone's coming.

Technician Cumil – Doctor. Turlough. I was looking for Saya.

Have you seen her?

Doctor – Oh, yes! She was just here.

Turlough – She went that way. Towards the hydroponics dome.

Technician Cumil – Oh. Good. Thanks. I'll... I'll look down there.

Doctor – See you later!

Turlough – He's another one. He doesn't trust either of us, I can tell.

Doctor – Yes, you're probably right. But we only have to keep them occupied for a little while longer.

Personal diary, Technician Saya Rohar. Six days after the incident (cont).

Cumil caught up with me in the corridor near Containment 12 and insisted that we talk privately. We used a maintenance compartment, and inside it was cramped and it smelled of stale, sweat-soiled old environment suits. He didn't waste any time on preamble, waving a crumpled screensheet at me – the course charts for the hyperlight jump.

'What's the problem?' I demanded.

Cumil tabbed through pages of stored data in the screensheet, holding it up to show navigational spreads of NGC 3115's local space. Parts of the map were hazy with only the most basic solar data. Iapara's intergalactic scout drones did a fast and dirty job of mapmaking on their initial surveys and sometimes it was decades, centuries before a manned ship ventured along their routes. The maps tended to be inaccurate, sometimes little better than a sketch reading 'here be dragons', but they were helpful in knowing which

parts of the universe had been explored – even in the loosest sense – and which hadn't. He stabbed a finger at an uncharted region.

'Do you know where this is?'

I shrugged. 'You're going to tell me, I assume.'

He waved the sheet at me. 'This is our destination, Saya. The Soloto system.'

'Don't be abstruse,' I retorted, snatching it from him. 'This sector's unmapped. Never been scanned, according to this data. Why would the doctor tell us to go to a system that's not even in our database?' I snorted in derision. 'Where would he even get that data from? If no human's been there, how would he even know it existed?' Cumil pointed to the hyperlight coordinates and my blood ran cold as I read them. They were a match. My derision dropped away. 'How?' I asked. 'There has to be some kind of mistake.

Maybe the energy plume wiped the data from the logs, but he had a back-up...'

Cumil shook his head. 'No. There are parts of the logs that were wiped in the aftershock, and they don't look anything like this. He's got information that isn't from the ship's databanks, that isn't even from Iapara Central. I reckon he has something inside that blue pod of his... I tried to get into it when he was elsewhere, but the door won't open. Must be scanlocked, or something.'

The pod. I had to admit, I had been slightly disturbed by the doctor's odd little capsule. It was the most non-standard piece of hardware I'd ever seen, in a lifetime of working for Iapara. It had

glyphs on it that meant nothing to me, in a language I'd never encountered before. When you touched it, it seemed... I don't know, warm. Like it was alive.

I shook off the thoughts, returning to the matter at hand. 'All right, let's assume you're correct. What do we do about it? We're too late to change course; we entered a hyperspace conduit hours ago. Short of an emergency defold and shutting down the drives, which would probably tear the *Pride* apart, there's nothing we can do until we get to Soloto.'

'Or wherever we're going,' he said darkly. 'The bio-computer's never heard of anywhere called Soloto.' Cumil took the sheet back. 'And that's not the only thing we have to worry about.'

Despite his seriousness, I let out a bitter laugh. 'You've got more? Oh, come on, let's hear it then.'

Cumil frowned. 'Whenever there's a serious accident aboard a survey vessel, if there's a field failure, what happens to any captured xenoforms in holding?'

I shrugged. 'Immediate isolation. Flash disintegration of anything that might be lethal. Don't want Arcturan Megalopsids or something like that wandering around the ship if the containment pens go offline.'

He nodded. 'That's right. So to be certain we were okay, I did a check of the iso-globes and found something troubling. Turns out we did have a handful of alien fauna samples on board before the plume hit.'

I didn't remember the ship taking on any specimens; but then I didn't remember anything for the past 12 months, did I? 'And?'

'And one of the holding globes was open. Whatever was in it got out. The flash disintegrator in that chamber didn't fire.'

'You're telling me we've got an alien animal running loose on this ship?' 'It looks that way,' he said grimly. 'I wanted you to be the first to know.'

My chest felt tight. 'And... And what do you expect me to do,

Cumil?'

He jerked a thumb back in the direction of the corridor. 'I want you to go ask your friend the doctor about it.' He drew a lasgun from a thigh pocket, all long and lethal-looking. 'I'm going to poke around on the maintenance tiers and see what got free.'

+ + + **Damage Report** + + + **Incident Timeline Projection** + + +

Incident minus 10 seconds – Unknown to crew, apparent spontaneous spatial anomaly formation occurs within critical contact zone.

Incident minus 4 seconds – Engines of C-83 Pride of Sheboygan activated, wave differential index triggering formation of ionic storm cell.

Incident minus 0 seconds – Storm cell releases high-energy plasmatic shock plume.

Incident plus 2 seconds – C-83 *Pride of Sheboygan* struck by plume. Massive and immediate shipwide systems failure.

Incident plus 4 seconds – Bridge pod suffers crucial force field protection collapse. All internal field barriers fail. Immediate termination of all hazardous xenoform specimens in storage by emergency containment system.

Incident plus 9 seconds – Explosive decompression of bridge pod complete. Cessation of all bridge crew life signs.

Personal diary, Technician Saya Rohar. Six days after the incident (cont.).

So I spoke to the doctor, and he didn't take it well. Not the stuff about the star maps and the coordinates for Soloto – I didn't talk about that, because it seemed of secondary importance to the matter of the xenoform. No, I told him what Cumil had found out about the one open pod in the labs, about how he was wandering around the Pride's lower tiers looking for evidence of something that probably wasn't even there... Almost as soon as I'd said it, I realised from the expression on the doctor's face that Cumil had been right, and worse still that the doctor had known about it all this time. Turlough hovered nearby me, as if he wasn't sure which way I was going to jump; if I was going to scream or pull a gun or call for help.

I have to say, I wasn't sure myself what it was I would do. I hadn't been prepared for this.

The doctor ran for the dropshaft to the maintenance tiers and I went after him, Turlough following on behind, those sharp eyes menacing me, daring me to raise an alarm. I tried to call Cumil on my sender bracelet, but only static answered.

The doctor ran, yelling out Cumil's name. We halted, seemingly

without rhyme or reason at random intervals, moving this way and that through the dingy, noisy machine shops and automatic workings of the ship.

I heard Cumil screaming from behind the plasma inducers, and Turlough pushed me aside as a figure stumbled out of the dimness. It was my crewmate, although he looked like he had been strung out and left for dead. Cumil's face was pallid and his eyes were watery. He was clutching at his head and moaning as if he had the god of all headaches pounding at the inside of his skull. For one instant, I felt a fragmentary flash of recall, a bolt of memory like the blink of a flame inside a dark cavern. I had felt that pain as well. It wasn't possible for me to place the where or the when of it, but I only had to see Cumil's eyes to have a kind of instant, animal sympathy for his plight He fell into my arms and I held him up from collapsing to the deck.

'Saya?' He was mumbling. 'Saya? Saya? Where are we?'

'You're safe,' I told him, even as I knew it was a lie. 'We're on the maintenance tiers.'

'What?' He flailed, trying to push away from me. 'Vega... Vega!' He shouted. 'I was just on Vega, with Triski and the others, it was her wedding... Now I'm here...'

'What is he babbling on about?' Turlough demanded.

'Triski is his sister,' I replied, my mind racing. 'But she was married before we shipped out. That happened over four solars

ago.' I held on to Cumil's hand. 'We're on the *Pride*,' I told him.

'The C-83 survey.'

Cumil shook his head. 'No,' he told me. 'Vega! What survey? I

don't remember any survey!'

That was when the doctor cried out and pointed. 'There! Keep

back from it!'

I turned and what I could glimpse in the half-light down there

was a shape. It moved so quickly that all I can really tell you about it were my impressions: a bulbous central mass of cobalt-tinted

meat, pearly and wet; fronds or perhaps tentacles, skipping across

the floor and then up the walls as it dragged itself away; and in the heart of it, a glowing core of matter where some odd synthesis was

taking place, a chemical fire burning newly ingested fuel.

It clattered away and vanished into the dark, and I was only too

glad to flee back to the main tiers.

I found Clinician Ivar's recovery report, or, at least, a fragment of it, left on his screensheet. He was in medical stasis for the duration, having taken a powerful shock when the electroplasma conduits

ruptured. He was so deep in his coma, even an auralink wouldn't

work, so I wasn't able to ask him to fill in any of the gaps.

The voice is male, deep and resonant 'Clinician Ivar Brons

recording. Specimen code is –' Static chews his words into white

noise. Among the rush, you can just about hear him say something

about 'fish' or possibly 'kiss' before the sound picture clears again.

and recovered it while the creature was in a dormant state. I'd

imagine it was sleeping off a meal. It resembles a soft-bodied octopod, flesh a translucent blue-white with a vibrant network of visible nerves close to the surface of the epidermis. Eye-spots exist at the end of each tentacle, and non-invasive scans show a large mass of tissue beneath its rudimentary brainstem, a sort of RNA that bears a very strong similarity to the artificially cultured neural stems in our bio-computers. I'm thinking that this creature may have naturally evolved a sort of mass memory storage via biological means. I can't wait to get a look inside it, I must say. I haven't seen anything that seems to indicate intellect, no tool use or evidence of language, so I'm guessing it may be a long-lived animal, perhaps with the need to store a lot of data about its environment. Anyway. We've shuttled it up to the Pride and put it in an iso-globe. Once I've cut it open, I should get a better –'

The recording breaks up again here, and that seems to be the last of it.

Personal diary, Technician Saya Rohar. Six days after the incident (cont.).

In bits and pieces, the doctor explained what he knew about the xenoform. He called it a memeovore. Just the word on its own made my skin prickle.

'It subsists on the variant forms of ribonucleic acid clusters found in the brain matter of sapient life,' he explained, as the rest of the crew gathered around in the mess hall. He talked rapidly but never seemed to get out of breath. 'A neurocytic feeder, you see. Quite harmless to its prey animals, just samples a little of their memory train and moves on. It grazes, a little from here, a little from there. Ifs naturally predisposed towards being a nibbler, taking things in small bites.' He paused. 'Well, normally...' I felt quite sick, and

there were angry voices being raised. Twenty-odd of us were all

that was left at this point, with the bridge crew dead, and tensions were running high. I saw that Zella and Keet had lasguns from the

armoury – which explained where Cumil had got his. Poor Cumil.

Turlough had bundled him into a medical pod and sealed him in

there, letting the drones sedate him. I had wanted to know more

about his encounter with the xenoform, but the doctor had pushed

the idea aside. He'd brought the rest of the crew up to the mess.

Turlough was in the corner of the room, by the service hatch,

fiddling with the console there. I had no idea what he was doing; the doctor kept talking, holding everyone's attention.

'It's a killer!' shouted Keet, and there was a chorus of assent.

The doctor disagreed firmly. According to him, the alien was –

and even I snorted with derision to hear this – peaceful. It was one of a race of vastly intelligent and long-lived beings that dated back to the pre-Earth era. Zella made a rude noise, which the doctor

ignored. 'It's a rare and very special life form,' he insisted, 'but like all of us it's a slave to its biology. It has to eat.' He sounded weary.

Zella brandished a pistol. 'Not any more,' she growled. 'You

knew about this thing and you didn't tell us, Doctor? We're not

going to simply let it roam around the *Pride*, picking on people when it gets hungry! It has to be destroyed!'

'We'll space it,' snapped Keet. 'Shoot the suncursed thing and

vent it!'

Everyone else was talking over one another, irate and loud, and

no one but me was paying attention to the doctor any more. His

words were worthless to them now. They wanted blood, and when the memeovore was dead I didn't doubt they'd turn their fury on him. I have to admit, my feelings were on the same axis. This thing had been freed in the chaos after the plume strike and siphoned off months of our pasts, taking bites of memory from every member of the crew. How could that not have made you furious, to know it had robbed you of time, of who knows what?

Just then I saw a look pass between the doctor and Turlough, and I realised they had known how we would react all along. It was as if they were waiting for the reaction, as if they'd seen it all before.

Yes, that expression on the doctor's face was disappointment, world-weary and sad all at once. 'I'm sorry, Saya,' he told me. 'I can't allow your people to kill it.'

I knew what he would do. The understanding of it was instant, hard in my thoughts like diamond. Turlough tapped a key and two things happened; the service hatch popped open along with the main door to the mess hall. People screamed. The alien was hunched outside, and it rolled into the chamber, tentacles stabbing out. We recoiled as one, stumbling back into the far corner of the hall. There was no escape, no way past the monstrosity.

'Doctor!' I cried, but Turlough was bodily forcing him through the service hatch, away from the invader. His pain at betraying us was evident, but he hadn't let it stop him. The shock I felt at that revelation, at his abandonment, was the worst thing of all. I trusted him. We all trusted him.

Keet aimed a gun at the creature but nothing happened. Zella did the same. Somehow I knew already that the doctor had done something to all the weapons on the ship, rendered them inert in some fashion.

The memeovore touched Keet. It just *touched* him, that was all. And he squealed and fell to the deck, clutching his head. I heard Keet shriek out in terror, suddenly asking terrified questions. Where was he? What was going on? With just that brief brush of a limb, it had stripped days of his past from him.

The xenoform did the same to all the others, the ropey tentacles arcing out like whips, catching everyone who ran, everyone who stood and tried to fight it off. It grazed on us.

My shock melted into sudden action. All I could think of what the doctor had done, of the need to know why. In that instant, more than anything else, more than all the memories I had lost, I wanted to know why he had done this. Sacrificed us to it.

I dove for the service hatch as the iris leaves began to cycle shut, the figures of Turlough and the doctor disappearing behind it. I was the only one fast enough.

I say ‘fast enough’. I wasn’t really. I wasn’t all the way through when the service hatch cycled shut, and it took off my right leg just below the ankle. Pain like white fire slammed me into unconsciousness, and the last I remembered was hoping I would awaken and still know who I was.

Survey vessel C-83 crew manifest data request.

>**Ready.**>

Interrogative: query rank and/or posting crewman identity

Turlough.

>**Working. No such crewman.**>

Interrogative: confirm please.

>**Confirming. No crewmembers or corporate employees listed in any capacity under contract or freelance status with Iapara conforming to identity element 'Turlough'.**>

Check attached image, reference security recording. Interrogative: who is that man?

>**Unknown.**>

What about, then... I mean... Interrogative: who is the chief medical officer of this vessel? The doctor? Reference the recording again, the other man in the image. Is that the ship's doctor?

>**Negative. Survey vessel C-83 crew manifest lists CMO as Dr Jaynet-Lucre Tisher [deceased]. Target male identity unknown.**> Interrogative! Who are those men?

>**Unknown. Aspect patterns and clothing do not match shipboard**

garment regulations.>

Personal diary, Technician Saya Rohar. Nine days after the incident.

When I came to I was in the medical bay and there was a mesher boot around my mined leg. Through the translucent bio-plastic I could see the nanite mites working around a new bloom of bright white bone, etching in nerves and muscle tissue. If I had slept longer, I would have awakened to find a perfect reconstruction of

my foot in place, maybe wondering if the agony of the closing hatch had been some kind of bad dream.

Bad dream. It was all a bad dream. The doctor was sitting at the end of the bed, with that same wan smile. ‘I imagine an explanation is due,’ he offered.

As I was trying to frame what I wanted to say, the seal-curtain opened and Zella put her head through the gap. There was no sign of the venomous anger she’d displayed in the mess hall. She looked positively placid. ‘How are you, Saya?’ she asked. ‘We were all very worried about

‘I’m fine,’ I lied. I didn’t really know what to say. ‘Keet and the others, are they okay?’

She blinked. ‘Why shouldn’t they be?’

The doctor interposed himself before the conversation went any further. ‘Zella, Soya’s still quite weak. Why don’t you come back in a little while?’

She accepted this with a nod. ‘All right, Doctor, if you say so. Oh, and before I forget, Turlough asked me to tell you that the transition is complete. We’ll be in close orbit over Soloto in about a shiphour.’

When Zella was gone I shot him a poisonous glare. ‘You wiped her memory!’

‘The memeovore did that, not me. Just a little bit. A couple of days each.’

‘Each?’ I grated. ‘you let it feed on everyone?’ A cold certainty settled in my bones. ‘ *Again*? This isn’t the first time you’ve done it, is

it?'

He nodded. 'I'm sorry, Saya. There wasn't any alternative.'

'Who are you?' I demanded. 'You and Turlough, you're not even part of this ship's crew! You don't work for Iapara!'

'No, we don't. We're just... Concerned parties, I suppose.'

I rose up from the bed. 'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't call Zella back in here and have you thrown in an iso-globe!'

The sadness was there in his eyes once again. 'Because I can tell you what you are missing, if you want to know.'

'Why wouldn't I want to know?' I said. I heard the slight falter of doubt in my own words, but if the doctor heard it too he made nothing of it.

He offered me his hand. 'Can you walk? I've got something to show

Samizdata download begins.

Iapara are the absolute worst **[redacted]** of all the corporate entities out there, polluting the universe with their complete lack of any moral code! We're not just talking about relatively low-level ethical lapses like testing cosmetics on clones, **[redacted]** the **[redacted]**, or time-trawling the Dumb Ages for primitives to experiment on.

No! Iapara have consistently ignored the pressures from hundreds of Transgalactic Community members and continued to take part in the wilful capture and dissection of xenoform life – no, please, let me finish! – of xenoform life proven to be as sentient as you or I!

And for what? So they can pad pockets already groaning with every credit, ijk-dollar and triganic pu they can put their manipulators on!

[redacted] ! **[redacted]** ! The fact that a loathsome corporate entity with such utter disregard for the sanctity of all intelligent life can continue to operate is a damning indictment of the political universe we are forced to live in! I only hope that the involvement of the **[redacted]** will change this state of affairs in due course!

Samizdata download concludes.

Personal diary, Technician Saya Rohar. Nine days after the incident (cont.).

They were both aliens, from planets that I'd never even heard of Gallifrey and Trion. Afterward, I looked them up on the cartographic database, but there was nothing there. I wonder if he deleted the information first. I suppose I should have asked.

The blue capsule – his 'research pod' – was actually a vessel. I'm not going to begin to go on about what I saw inside it, or how it actually fitted inside such a tiny hull. There have been enough mysteries in my life recently, and this was one too many. No. Sticking to the matter at hand, then.

It turned out that some of the *Pride*'s logs actually had escaped erasure. The damage – some of it done by the plume, some of it by the xenoform's first attempts to feed off the bio-computers – was severe, but the doctor had salvaged many of the crew journals, including mine. Standing in front of the screen before the pod's bizarre main console, I watched stuttering images of myself from the past year, seeing the passage of time on my own face, the slowly changing manner of my own voice. The toughening there, the slip

of affect. Towards the end, I found myself disquieted. The woman on the screen, she wasn't me. She was somebody else, burned out and callous, beaten down and dehumanised.

'You captured the xenoform and brought it aboard,' explained Turlough. 'Your people had some idea of what it was and they were going to cut it up, figure out if the company could make some money off it.'

I wanted to deny that – but the face of the woman on the screen, the words she had said, they made a lie of any disavowal. I heard my own voice say it. We'd known there was a chance it was sentient. But thoughtless and unsympathetic, I'd agreed with Ivar's recommendation; what's worse is, not a single person aboard the ship had voiced a complaint. We just didn't care. The admission brought a wave of loathing towards that other Saya, the one on the screen. What could have happened to her over a year to make her so cold, what kind of awful isolation? Part of me was glad that I would never know.

'The accident let the alien loose.' The doctor picked up the thread of the conversation. 'It was panicked. It fed on your crew, and in turn the crew fell apart. That's when we arrived. The TARDIS, my ship, homed in on the spatial anomaly that damaged the *Pride* and when we got here...' He frowned. 'Well, after a while we realised what had happened. It left us both alone, you see? It seems our varieties of RNA were not to its tastes.'

‘You hid it from us.’ I began putting the pieces together. ‘You let it feed off us, wipe out the last 12 months.’

‘I found a way to communicate with it, on a very basic level,’ he explained.

‘Soloto... You pretended to be part of the crew and made us light for Soloto. Why?’

Turlough operated a control and the screen showed an image of a green world. ‘Humans won’t discover this planet for another fifty centuries,’ he said, his words clipped. ‘The memeovore will be able to live peacefully here.’

‘I would have taken it straight here in the TARDIS,’ said the doctor, ‘but it’s quite delicate in its own way. The alien is sensitive to temporal vortices. Dematerialisation would have killed it. The only way to get it to Soloto was aboard your ship. The logs showing where you found it were destroyed.’ He sighed. ‘This was the only alternative we had.’

I studied the image. ‘Why this world?’

At a nod from the doctor, Turlough worked the scanner and the image dipped into the planet’s atmosphere. I saw vast emerald savannahs and packs of towering, lumbering pachyderms. ‘The

Solotolia have an extremely slow memory process. They think in glacial eras, not in minutes and seconds. They won’t miss the odd few millennia of recall here and there. We’ll send the xenoform down in a shuttle, and it should be able to live out the rest of its life

undisturbed.'

I returned his nod. 'There's just one problem. Once we put the creature off the ship, once you leave... Iapara will come looking for us with a rescue ship. What's to stop them finding all this?' I gestured to the screen. He handed me a makeshift gadget; his communications device. 'It can understand you,' he explained. 'All you have to do is tell it where to go.' And suddenly I knew that there was only one way to conclude this. I tapped my sender bracelet and set it to a shipwide broadcast. 'This is Saya to all crew,' I told them, 'there's an emergency. I need everyone to assemble in the mess hall immediately.'

'Thank you,' said the doctor. 'You're doing the right thing.'

'Am I?' But I was. I was sure of it.

I've done my best to assemble what I could find and place it together in a kind of coherent + + + **COMMENCING DELETION**

PROTOCOL + + + *been difficult to be sure of the placement* + + +

ERASING FILES + + + *The damage* + + + **ERASING** + + + *was* + + +

ERASING + + + **ERASING** + + + **DELETION COMPLETED** + + +

Personal diary, Technician Saya Rohar. Twelve days after the incident.

Keet got the last of the damage on the outer hull repaired, and everyone seems to be breathing a little easier now without the threat of another explosive decompression looming over our heads. Quite how we found ourselves way out here in the middle of an uncharted zone is beyond any of us, but all the fears and concerns about the memory we've lost have faded a little after Zella reported the signal

from an Iapara factory cruiser in the neighbouring quadrant. It's the Father of the Bride, out of our old home port, Vega, so their rescue will be like meeting up with family. Everyone is hoping they'll be

able to help us fill in the months we're missing, but in all honesty I'm more worried that we'll be put on censure for the damage to the

ship. All our flight logs are empty, there's nothing in any of the iso-globes... The company might be more forgiving if we actually had

something to show for all this. I think, once we make planetfall at a depot, I'm going to start a deep-range investigation into this, go into everything, the full fine-detail search. Perhaps something will come up. There are bound to be clues, bits and pieces. I mean, it's 12

months. A lot can change in that amount of time.

165

The Report

Gary Russell

An Adventure of Lukas Ryan (Captain LE Precinct #8),

with the Seventh Doctor, Ace and Hex

It was raining, I remember that.

Mind you, it was always raining. It is always raining. It never

stops. One day when they come to write the history of this place –

God help us that Mankind would ever be so bored it'd want to read

about us – they'll note that it was grey and damp. I always thought

as a kid that the settlers must've picked up a job lot of grey paint cheap somewhere. Come to a new world, build your own future,

create a whole new life for you and yours. Oh, and don't forget to

paint everything grey.

Anyway, it's not about grey. Grey was actually the last colour on

my mind back then.

I remember thinking about colours. That's a start.

A kid. Youth, rather. Must've been early twenties, but he had a look about him that made me think he was a bit wet around the ears. He arrived before I did, helping the GMs, which was kind of cool of him.

You know, thinking about it, he wasn't wet around the ears at all, he was really good. But it was the look, his eyes – they were grey too, I think– they just said, 'Pm out of my depth here.' But he wasn't, not really. I think he said something about a girl, but I'm pretty sure she wasn't there. Yeah, that's right, he wasn't looking for her, he was avoiding her. Yeah. Avoiding her. Guess they'd had a bit of an argument and she'd gone off to another part of town. Or maybe another town. I can't remember.

But I am trying.

So. So, I got out the car. Pete was already there, I know that.

Yeah, it was Pete who kind of filled me in on stuff. He said he'd got the call about five minutes earlier – he'd been on the freeway into Capital City and had done a one-eighty and headed straight back. He was closer than the rest of the guys so he got there first.

You know something? The grey-eyed guy was in front of me,

shouting at the GMs, getting them organised. They listened to him. I mean, hell, since when did GMs listen to anyone other than their Router and the guy that puts cash into their accounts? But they listened to him. Must've been the accent.

Course, at that time, we didn't know if the GMs were necessary or just a precaution. That came later.

Pete and one of the guys from street patrol went off to find the super. I don't know the other guy's name, sorry. Seen him around, though. Nice guy, smiled a lot when you passed him in the car. Saw him once helping some old woman carry her shopping up the pathway to her apartment block. He was clearly *that* kind of LE. The sort the recruitment posters are always crying out for – the kind we're always lacking in.

But I never knew his name. And I never saw him or Pete alive again. Jeer, I can remember his face, why don't I know his name? He was Indigies, I know that. But how can a guy be so alive one minute and the next time you see him, bits of him just aren't... attached any more?

And Pete. Pete Goran – he used to say he could trace his family back to the Settlers. I mean, that's kind of unusual. Pointless and unusual – few of the Settling families volunteered their heritage since the war. But Pete was a good kid; he hated the war.

And if he'd stayed on the freeway into Capitol City he'd... hell, he'd still be alive. And maybe it'd be me on a slab right now, my wife crying as she signed the forms to give my body up for cremation.

But it's not, it's Pete's.

I remember him saying he was going in and I suggested going with him. I remember that.

And I remember the hand on my arm, the voice from behind me saying I didn't need to go, that I was needed out in the car park. You see, that was the first time I saw him. He stopped me going with Pete and Smiley Guy. And I guess it depends how you look at it – maybe if I'd gone in with them, I *would* be dead. But maybe, just maybe, if I'd gone in too I could've got them both out.

Yeah, right.

There was no getting out for Peter and Smiley Guy. They were dead the moment they walked away from me, they just didn't know it.

I wonder what they talked about as they ran in? I wonder if they were talking about what was inside, or whether they were armed enough. Or what they watched on the teevee last night. I mean, what would I have talked about?

Wish I could remember what I was talking about the night before all this happened. My wife – I know we must've discussed work

over dinner. I mean, it's what we did, night after night. But I'm damned if I can remember what we talked about.

My wife. She's a teacher.

She works in one of the outer Communities – cut themselves off from so much, but still they let in the teachers. GMs, LEs, they let them in.

I went in once. One of the Community nights – me and the other LEs from the department were giving a talk about the law, how to stay on the right side of it. The Communities have so much

potential for trouble, bringing up their kids in solitude, not joining in with everyone else.

Hell, Community is an ironic description of them – they are about as far removed from the rest of society as you can get.

My wife, right. She works out in the Southern area Community school – she teaches history. Never did history myself.

I remember that.

'History teaches us about the mistakes of the past and how to avoid repeating them.'

The man said that.

I'll get to him in a moment. Him, I remember. Clearly.

These Communities have so much pride – frankly for so little reason – but although they let the outsiders in to teach, to inform, they won't let us enforce. That's their own job apparently. So when something goes wrong, they try to deal with it themselves. About two years back, one of the schools got attacked.

I was one of the team sent over to help.

Some guy with a bomb wanted to make a political point and thought taking out one of the Communities would make that point for him. And they just sat there – did nothing. They let him in, he sat in the school hall with the kids, a bomb strapped to his waist and they just talked to him. Eventually he decided they were distracting him and he set the bomb off. Whole place gone, nearly all the kids and teachers. Only three survived.

And you know what? The Community didn't blame him. They just accepted it was part of life. Of course, they pointed out, in that calm, peaceful way they have, that he wasn't part of the

Community, because no one who was would ever do such a thing.

I'm not so sure – there's something about being in all that seclusion, all that one-step-out-of-real-life, that I reckon creates monsters but keeps them contained.

Ever since then, I keep asking my wife to stop, to come teach in the City. But she won't.

I think that's what we must've talked about.

Again.

168

'But diversity is what makes life worthwhile,' the man said.

If I can remember that, I must've talked about my wife with him too.

Sorry.

Hell, what does that say about me? I can remember one strange man on the street, spouting philosophical bull, but a conversation with my own wife? Can't remember where we talked, let alone what we said to one another.

Guess that's what this job does to you. And your wife. And family.

But enough of that. You need to know what happened at the mall, yeah?

Okay.

I'm trying. Really trying.

There was a woman. An old woman. She had a bag – I guess she'd been shopping. The kind of woman Smiley Guy would have helped. She was talking to the man.

He was a funny guy. He had these eyes – amazing eyes. You could look at them and I swear they were blue, but the more I listened to him... I swear they were brown. Or green. It wasn't the light, it was like...

Do you remember when you were a kid? Those stones you got. You clasped them tight, in your palm and they changed colour. Green if you were calm, blue if you were sad, purple if you were angry and all that?

I had a bunch of them as a kid.

His eyes – that's what they were like. They changed colour with his moods.

They were blue as he talked to the old woman.

I reckon he was sad. She must have told him something sad. And then he looked at me.

God, it was horrible.

You ever see that movie where the dad has to tell his kids he's dying of cancer? And that they have to be brave and look after their mother? And they try to be brave, but their bottom lips are trembling, and they breathe in that way you do when you try not to cry, short, repeated deep breaths, then you let it out. And you try to smile, to make a joke, swallowing every few seconds?

I watched that with my wife.

We cried. You can't help it– you see that sadness, you see all that effort not to let go, and while they're being brave on the screen, you have no luck holding it in.

The look he gave me, it was all that deep breathing, swallowing

and lip trembling in one package – but just in the eyes.

I felt so... cold. So shocked.

169

'I'm sorry.'

He said he was sorry but I can't remember what for. Was it something he said? Or something she told him?

Or because of what had happened to Pete and Smiley Guy?

No, it can't be – we didn't know they were dead by then.

Actually, you know, I remember something else now. The guy with the eyes and the young guy helping the GMs. They knew one another. The young guy came over at one point, explaining how the GMs were ready.

And it was him saying that that made the guy with the eyes go into the building.

Hell, yeah. It was then that it happened.

I remember watching him go, ignoring my yells. My telling him not to, that it was dangerous.

The old woman, she was staring at the floor, at her feet, as if she knew something bad was going to happen.

And the young guy, he also yelled out something after him – something about what he should say to... something that didn't make sense. Ace. That was the word he used.

I remember the next bit really clearly.

Eye-guy was walking away from us, grey coat, stupid straw hat,

umbrella unopened – weird, it was raining, like I said.

He pushed open the mall doors.

They didn't open automatically – the power must've been off.

Yeah, I can see that now – he just pushed them open like he was

going shopping.

The young guy turned to the old woman, that's right – he said

something to her. He didn't shout, but there was they in his eyes, I can see that now.

He asked her if is she was happy now.

I mean, what did she have to do with it?

It's coming back now – I can see it all – so I'm guessing maybe

I'll remember more about her as I'm going.

You still want me to take this in strict order, yeah? Okay.

I don't get why the eye-guy –

Doctor!

That's what the young guy shouted! Doctor! Was that his name?

His job? I guess he was a GM too?

Jeez, that's weird.

So why did this Doctor guy stop me going in? Yet go in himself?

And then this is the bit I told you earlier.

The old woman said that it wasn't my time. I really remember

that clearly. It wasn't my time. You need to remember everything

because no one else will.

Fat good I am, then. I can't remember anything properly – it's all

just images, flashing on in my head, like someone's turning the lights on. But he saved my life, I know that.

By not letting me go in like Pete and Smiley Guy had done.

And that's when it all went bang.

The mall went up in a huge fireball.

Still don't know how many were inside, how many hostages they had – I'm not sure if we just don't know, or if I just can't remember being told.

I mean, obviously Pete and Smiley Guy died.

And the Doctor?

No... no, he was there later.

He and the old woman were there later.

When she told us her story.

But I'm jumping ahead. Sorry.

Stick to the facts.

It's what I'm trained to do.

It's what we did after the Community massacre. It's what my wife always said was so useful to helping the Community pull together afterwards. The fact that I and the other LEs all stuck to the facts. No recriminations. No opinions. Just facts.

Facts is all we have these days, isn't it?

I mean, I've got supposition, opinion and judgements. But it's the facts that get us through things like this.

Jeez, I wonder if anyone's told Pete's girl?

Met her once. Nice girl. Can't think what her name was... Sheree.

Yeah, that's it, Sheree.

Hope you guys have told her how he's dead.

On duty.

Just like we always hope.

No point in being hit by a bus or falling off a ladder when you're

in the LE.

You want to go performing your duty. And not just because of

the payouts to the family – but because it makes it all worthwhile. It means you made a difference.

That's what they always told us in training.

But I mentioned that to the Doctor's young friend afterwards.

And he said that was rubbish. What mattered was living.

How you live is what's important, not how you die. Dying is

easy. The young guy said that too.

He probably got that out of a book of clichés.

The Doctor gave him a look that suggested I was right.

But I'm jumping ahead again, aren't I?

So. The old woman – she was the key. It's coming back now. The

mall went up.

The LEs and GMs went ballistic, into action but there was a

degree of panic.

We thought... yeah, that's right, we thought we had a shooter.

Maybe two. The reports we heard, there were hostages. They

wanted something. So why blow it up?

Why kill everyone?

What was the message? Even the guy in the Community had a message. Politics? Religion? Indigies veterans from the war–the ones who escaped the camps but held the Republic responsible? Or perhaps they just hated the design of the mall?

They just blew it up.

I got a piece of shrapnel in my leg. Went down instantly. The young guy was at my side, staunching the bleeding. Nice of him considering he thought the Doctor was dead, but that's the kind of guy he was – straight into action.

Just like he'd been when he first arrived – head screwed on tight.

After sorting out me, he went towards the wreckage, but the LEs were keeping the medics back. The head of the GMs was livid, but we were right to do so – no one was gonna survive and the GMs would've been charbroiling themselves for nothing.

Let the fire guys turn up and put it out before we started trying to get GMs, CSUs and our guys in.

It was going to be a long time before we'd get a chance to identify those inside.

Or so we thought.

It was the old woman who saw the Doctor first. Yeah. Her. She yelled and I looked up.

So did the young guy and, you know, I saw his face. Relief, sure. But something else. Something that didn't actually seem surprised the Doctor was alive. As if this happened to them every day of their

lives.

It was a look that said, ‘Good, one problem solved,’ and he got on with helping the GMs prepare their kits.

I know the fire crews arrived around then but, you know, I didn’t care. Nor did I care about my blasted leg.

All I realised was that I was seeing the impossible.

The old woman gasped. The Doctor was there, pushing up some detritus. His umbrella was unfurled now – it was huge. I mean, ludicrously so – I’ve never seen an umbrella that big. And sheltered with him under it were about eight people. Men, women, kids.

He escorted them back towards me, past the astonished LEs, GMs and everyone else.

And I remember he wasn’t wearing that grey jacket any more.

Shirtsleeves and a silly sweater.

He stopped by me and the old woman.

He spoke to her. Said something about guilt. Yeah, I remember that clearly – guilt, because I immediately thought it odd. Was he implying she had set it all up? She was one of the bombers in the mall?

And she just said something back about letting them go. But she didn’t mean the folk that the Doctor had saved.

There was something else, an undercurrent.

And then she turned to me and said one bizarre thing.

She said that last time she turned a blind eye, she pretended it

wasn't happening, but this time she knew her duty.

And she held her hands out, as if I was expected to cuff her.

I've been doing this job for 23 years now. And this is the first

time a peep has offered themselves up like that. I guess I just... well, froze. I mean, maybe it was the shock of the mall going up, I don't

honestly know.

But all this... it threw me.

And I... I don't really know what happened next – it was all a

blur.

Various GMs came and took away the survivors; the young guy

checked the Doctor over, hissing words and phrases at him. Angry,

but in that way you are when your kid runs into the road in front of traffic. Angry the kid was stupid, but also hugely relieved it hasn't been hit.

You want to lock it away in its room for years till it grows up and

can protect itself.

The young guy was like that with the Doctor.

I couldn't hear what they said exactly, but I got the gist from the

young guy's tone and gestures.

Then he gave the Doctor a huge hug and the look on the Doctor's

face made me smile for the first time. I guess he's not the kind of

guy who enjoys physical contact like that – he was so

uncomfortable, patting the young guy on the back like he was

patting a cushion.

The young guy – got it! Hex! He was called Hex! I thought it was

a curse or something but realised it was what the Doctor was calling

him!

His name was Hex. Yeah.

So this Hex guy, he heads away again and, when I look round, the old woman has gone.

And then I saw two new guys stood there. Saying nothing.

And I saw they were tied at the hands, tightly, by grey rope.

No, it wasn't rope – of course, now I realise. It was the sleeves of 173 the Doctor's grey jacket. Ripped and used to tie their wrists together. In front of them, not behind.

Military style.

And there was this girl. Braided hair tight on her head, thin ponytail down her back.

Red leather jacket, tight blue jeans.

Never seen her before.

She wasn't tied, nor had she been under the umbrella.

She looked at me and shoved the tied-up guys towards me.

And she said that the Doctor had told her to give them to me.

I limped over – Jeez, my leg hurt– and said thank you. And asked who they were – but realised before I'd finished. These guys were the bombers. They were late forties, but not... criminal-looking.

They were, dust aside, pretty well dressed. Suits. Good suits.

And then I saw the lapel badges – the image of Kellaque.

And I knew I had the answer to who they were, and what had happened. I looked back at the people the Doctor had saved. Yeah,

all of them, they were all Indigies.

These guys were Settlers.

Like Pete had been. Pete, the Law Enforcer they killed.

The Doctor was at my shoulder, saying he got as many people safe as he could. He thought there were three, possibly four others who'd been right next to the bomb.

He was crying.

I mean, how mad is that? He was crying. He'd saved all those lives but was crying for the ones he hadn't been able to get. No one else could've done anything and he was just one man, and he saved all those people.

And with this girl – Ace, he called her, which explained so much from earlier – they'd even got two of the bombers out to stand trial.

Which is good – it'll be important to get these guys on trial and show we won't tolerate this stuff any more.

No more wars, no camps, no persecution. None of it.

Those days have to be gone.

If the Settlers got their way, we'd have no Communities, no drop-outs, no artists, nothing.

But at least the trams would run on time. I remember one of those guys on teevee saying that once.

Moron.

I waved to a couple of guys from one of the precincts to come and take them away. I needed to talk to the Doctor, Ace and Hex some more. Find out who they were, where they'd come from and

why they'd helped.

They weren't Settlers, obviously. Nor Indigies. No, they were

from somewhere off-planet.

Another colony? Another society entirely?

Either way, I knew we owed them big time.

The girl, Ace, she was the one who spoke, and I looked into her

eyes as she did.

I can't remember what she said. I don't think it was important,

just details of how she'd got the bombers out before the actual

bombs went off – no, I was distracted by her eyes.

I've got a thing for eyes. I notice them.

Grey – like Hex's. Like the Doctor's could be too. But Hex's

eyes, they were full of attitude, full of balls. And the Doctor's, they were alive, curious, energetic.

But Ace? Her eyes were... well, dead is the only way I can

describe it. Tired. As if this was the kind of thing she also did every day but was bored with it. As if saving all those lives, catching the Settlers, as if it was just boring and irrelevant

And now she was apologising. She'd seen Pete and Smiley Guy –

I guess that's who she meant – run in seconds before the explosion.

She said she'd tried to warn them, but it was too late.

She said it was important I knew they died instantly.

I guess it was.

No one should die in drawn-out pain.

Hex and the Doctor were back.

I thanked them all, said they were real heroes.

Hex laughed. He said something about that being the Doctor – always the hero. And the Doctor suddenly snapped at him. Shouted almost. I'm not sure what he said, but it took both his friends by surprise, I remember that

Then the Doctor grabbed my hand, shook it. He said they had to go, to leave, but he also gave me a piece of paper.

I asked him why he was there, how he'd known what to do, what was going on inside the mall...

And he said the old woman was the answer.

The Doctor tapped the paper and I opened it. It was an address on the East Side, down by the skimmer ports. He said the old woman was known to him, but from far, far away. Not from our world anyway. That she'd come here because she was bored – he said he understood that kind of boredom too well. (I didn't really get what he meant by that, or the look Ace and Hex gave him.) But she'd got involved, and things had run away with her.

He said to look her up and that would explain why he'd been there.

By the time I looked up the exact location on my PDA, they'd vanished. A few hours later, I remember being sent home by the

GMs – my leg was hurting so I was away from the crime scene earlier than most.

But I didn't go home. Didn't get back to my wife – I sent her an email instead, saying I'd be back in a couple of hours but that I was okay and she shouldn't worry. I guess I should've cellnetted, but I wasn't up for talking. Not yet. I needed to get everything straight. Which is pretty ironic, bearing in mind the state my head's in now. But, yeah, instead of home I went to the old lady's apartment

It was a nice one – well, East Side it would be – and I passed my ID over the door and got access.

The old woman was at her front door before I knocked, saying she'd been expecting me.

She held up an image-scan. It was me.

The Doctor, I suggested, must've given it to her. She confirmed that. Her home was spartan. Weird. I've been into enough old ladies' houses over the years on this job to know that by the time women get into their seventies, their houses are filled with trinkets, souvenirs and heirlooms. And cats.

This house had nothing. No photos, no woollen chair rugs, not a cat hair in sight. Just one framed painting by the window, showing waves crashing on a beach.

A small table was in the living area, two armchairs set aside it, tea in a china pot.

I remember the china really well. In fact, everything about this house is dead clear to me.

The china struck me because it was... incongruous, I think that's the word.

As I said, spartan. Yet there was a really fussy tea service, patterned with blue pictures of fat old men in robes on small bridges over flower gardens. I had never seen anything like it before.

She made me sit in the left-hand chair and sat in the other, and within seconds there was a cup of tea in my hands. Earl Grey, she said. Whatever that means.

It tasted... slightly nutty. It was nice. The whole room smelled of it –either she drank tons of it, or it was getting to me.

She asked if I knew why I was there.

It was like she'd summoned me, rather than me going there as part of my job. Like I'd had no choice...

So, I played along and asked her if she could answer that. She told me that the Doctor had sent me. That he gave me her address after she had disappeared.

I pointed out that the last time we spoke, she'd tried to offer herself up for arrest but had vanished, which I didn't think was in her favour.

She smiled – stunning blue eyes.

Eyes like the Doctor's, I suddenly thought.

Hell, why do I remember that?

But it was true – like him, the eyes didn't match the face. They hinted at far more age and wisdom than even she appeared to have.

She rambled on for a while, as if trying to avoid the subject. She talked about how much she loved the place – I thought she meant

her apartment, then realised she was talking further afield. I asked if she meant Central City, but she just told me to think globally.

She told me her childhood had been very strict, all school, all science and industry. Research and observation.

I asked what school she went to, wondering if it was one of the Community schools, but she laughed.

It was a lovely laugh. Really... well, sweet, I guess. The laugh of someone who means it, who isn't just patronising but is genuinely finding things funny.

Suddenly I asked her how she knew the Doctor.

Without breaking a beat, she said they'd gone to the same school, although not at the same time. They weren't contempories, she said.

She was keen to point that out. In fact, she said that he'd been an inspiration to her, that much of what she had done in her life was as a result of growing up hearing stories about the Doctor.

I didn't say it – somehow it seemed rude to interrupt her train of thought, but this was patently ludicrous. She was twice the Doctor's age. Surely, he must have grown up hearing perhaps of her exploits.

But I didn't bring this up.

If I had, I think she'd have laughed at me again.

She discussed a childhood spent playing on mountains and in old libraries, an adolescence spent strolling through red grass, climbing silver-leaved trees, swimming in grey seas, staring at twin suns and multi-faced daisies. She told me of the academy she'd trained at, specialising in administration, in the filing and indexing of information, of accounting and notating and recording.

And how boring that seemed, to be stuck in one place, noting

everything that occurred in life and never actually living it. How she yearned to put her skills into practice, knowing that she'd spend her entire life knowing stuff but never being able to use it. In the field was the term she used. A weird term from an old woman.

I decided that either she was crazy or she was alien.

And you know what, I realised I'd already accepted she was an

alien. As was the Doctor. It was a long time since anyone had come

from off-world. Since before the war, I guess. Hell, my first day

with an ET – and I met a whole bunch of them.

She said that, inspired by the Doctor, she'd moved out of her

home, abandoning her studies, and that although her home had tried

to find her – I didn't really understand that, I guess she meant her family, but three times she talked about the home as if it were a real person – she'd fled here. And lived here for many, many years.

She'd taken a job as a secretary shortly before the war – it only

occurred to her later that I wasn't born until 25 years after the war, but it seemed irrelevant. She talked about it with such clarity – to her it most have been like yesterday.

And when the war started, the firm she worked for was

immediately a target for the Indigies. She worked for a member of

the Settler Monarchs.

And then she explained how the Settlers quickly crushed the

Indigies, how their scorched-earth policy was formulated and how

she had been present, taking notes and minutes of the meetings.

She'd been Kellaque's personal assistant

I didn't know whether to be impressed at the high office she'd

held or appalled that she worked for the man responsible for

destroying fifty per cent of the population in a two-year war.

And she talked of the things she learned, of the policies, or the weapons of mass destruction and, above all, of the concentration camps, the gulags that Kellaque put the captured Indigies in before vapourising them.

She looked at me and took the teacup from my hand, placing it down gently on the table. She placed my hand between both of hers and said quietly that she knew. She knew every plan, every movement and everything.

And, she said quietly, she did nothing. She got on with her job, took notes and made all the arrangements. She had worked out ways of moving people, of administering Kellaque's officers and troops, she'd supplied new ways of thinking, enabling the war effort to move ahead.

And so millions of Indigies, millions of people like my grandparents and Smiley Guy's grandparents and the parents and grandparents of the survivors we'd seen at the mall today, were dying in the camps.

And she turned a blind eye.

And now I understood.

I understood why the word guilt had been spoken by her and the Doctor. Why she had tried to surrender. Why she'd changed her mind but asked the Doctor to send me here, to her home.

I understood why she turned in the new Kellaque-supporting Re-

Settlers, the bombers in the mall.

She said that she had found a way to ignore the atrocities once,

because she'd been able to pretend it was just a job. It wasn't her

planet. It wasn't her civilisation.

But now it was starting again. A new generation were preparing

to commit themselves to re-establishing Kellaque's flawed ideals.

Kellaque himself had died, gunned down by the Indigies in a final

surge sixty years ago.

And here were young fools, hoping to bring back his concepts of

hate, evil and darkness.

And she could no longer live with the guilt.

She said she had so much power, she could have done so much,

but she'd refused to take responsibility for herself, for Kellaque, for the Settlers or the war or anything.

It hadn't been her business.

She had ignored it once and millions had died.

And she removed her hand.

And... oh, my God... oh, my God, now I remember.

It wasn't the bomb that screwed with my head – it was her. The

nutty-tasting tea.

She drugged me.

She told me so, as she stood up.

I tried to move, but my arms and legs felt like lead.

She looked at me and said it was important that someone would

understand eventually.

And that in drugging me, she'd given the Doctor and herself time to get away.

And I remember watching as she got up. Suddenly she didn't seem so old in her movements. As if this bizarre... confessional had taken a huge weight off her shoulders.

She moved the picture of the grey waves and revealed a safe. She opened it, took out a gun and... and blew her own head off.

And I must've blacked out.

I awoke not long after. The Doctor was there, so were Ace and Hex. Of the old woman, nothing, but I could smell the bleach on Hex's hands as he passed by.

Ace asked if I wanted a cup of tea, albeit in a tone that suggested making tea was the last thing she ever wanted to do in her life. I smiled at this – somehow this strange girl didn't strike me as someone used to getting the drinks in.

The Doctor said he was sorry I'd got caught up in whatever the woman had been doing.

And, you know, all I remember thinking about was that he was wearing a new jacket – a navy blue one, a strange crest woven into the breast pocket in a darker blue. I started for a moment, and realised it looked like a question mark. How appropriate – I had so

many questions.

I think he anticipated that, because he smiled and shook his head

and went into the kitchen area. I looked at Ace as she gave me the tea. I wondered if the old woman had killed herself out of guilt as she'd implied, or something else.

I asked Ace if she knew the woman's name. My LE instinct – there must be someone to tell, someone to identify the body, wherever that was now. Someone to... inherit the apartment. Someone who cared. Back home.

Wherever that was.

Ace smiled, said it was good that I was seeing a bigger picture, thinking universally rather than globally. I muttered that I thought that was patronising, and she just agreed it was.

But I don't think she was being apologetic, just perfunctory.

Stating the obvious, I guess.

Ace explained they didn't even know her name – that she'd just contacted the Doctor.

But I remembered her saying that they'd gone to the same school.

Hex emerged from the bedroom to mutter something about what a reflection that was on the Doctor's school before following the Doctor's route into the kitchen.

And then I understood.

Guilt.

And I asked Ace if that was why they'd come to my colony, to... our world.

It wasn't about the old woman's guilt.

It was the Doctor's. That old woman, she'd idolised the Doctor,

set out to live her whole life in his... in his shadow.

To try to be like him and, instead, she'd come here and abused it

all. That hero worship, that adulation she'd had for the Doctor – it'd cost millions of lives.

The Doctor's hand was now on my shoulder.

And he said that, one day, maybe I should tell my story.

But not yet... oh, my God... I remember he did something to me,

something that would stop me recording this report until they'd had

time to get away, taking the old woman's body with them.

He crouched before me, and stared into my face – speaking

softly, words I can't recall... and I felt too tired, everything just...

just seemed to fragment, drift away.

The last thing I remember before you waking me up here was

his... his eyes. Grey... no blue... sort of browny green, as they stared at me...

All that guilt in those eyes...

180

You Had Me at Verify

Username and Password

Stel Pavlou

An Adventure of Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden,

with doctor@myspace.com

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Sunday, July 08, 2007 09:15 AM

Subject: There you are!!!

My Dearest Darling Doctor,

Is that really you? After all this time! Hiding away in something

you've called *my* space? How romantic! How adorable! And so *very* clever! Finally I've found you again! I AM your space! And you are

ALL my spaces!

These past few years have been terrible. I lie awake all day

thinking only of you! You, and that mound of stringy stuff– what

did you call it? Hair? Peculiar it may be, but I don't think it should stand in the way of true love. I'm prepared to work with it. I've

travelled from one end of the galaxy to the other to find the man

who single-handedly saved Trebbiden from the Kolranis Expansion

and stole my ventricles into the bargain!

Please, don't waste another moment. We must be together again!

Your devoted,

Calabria

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Sunday, July 08, 2007 10:27 AM

Subject: re: re: There you are!!!

I beg your pardon? What is this 'LOL' that you refer to?

Excuse my impertinence, my wonderful, wonderful Doccy, but

you really don't sound like yourself.

I must confess I still haven't mastered this new language. I consulted one of the lexicons, without success. The closest entry implies that I'm either a lazy lay-about or a dog with my mouth hanging open. I have no idea what a dog is, but I'm sure it sounds unpleasant.

You know how I hate to be teased!

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Sunday, July 08, 2007 12:16 AM

Subject: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

I see. I had no idea it could be done any other way.

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<Calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Sunday, July 08, 2007 01:47 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Well, if you really must insist on shortening it why didn't you just write 'I.'? What's the point in defining an action that everybody already knows can only be performed loudly? That would be like writing 'CW' (cried wetly), or 'LB' (listens brownly). Everybody knows there's only one way to listen! This planet you're on has a very strange way of doing things.

But enough of that Oh my darling Doctums, do tell me what

you've been up to on all those adventures in your little blue box!

You don't still have that infernal Charley following you all over the place, do you? Very jealous of me, that one. But what could I do? I knew from the momentyou first asked me to hold your coat that we were meant to be together. I told you I loved you, and you told me some kind of polarity thing needed reversing and I just knew you were the one.

Of course finding you again would have been ever so much easier drily little love beacon had stayed fastened to your ship. I can't count how many times I arrived at some far-flung destination only to discover that you had already left!

But I never gave up on us. I'm sure you have all sorts of wild and fascinating tales to tell me as to why you never came back for me. Just promise me you won't be too hard on yourself. I forgive you!

Well, it's half past twenty-seven and time for my beauty sleep. I want to be perfect for you when we see each other again, and I know now that I've found you, I shall sleep sweetly.

I await your reply with desperate longing,

182

Yours as ever,

Calabria

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 06:14 AM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Hello?

My darling, it's been hours and I've heard nothing from you.

Have you got yourself into trouble again?

Please, please let me know that you are safe. I'm coming to

Earth, my love. I'm coming so that we can be together!

Your true love,

Calabria

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 05:07 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

At last! Where have you been? I was so very worried.

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 05:13 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re, re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Yes, that is me in the picture. Has it been so long that you've

forgotten?

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 05:17 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Why, Doctor, stop it, you're making me inflate! You say the sweetest things. Do you *really* think I'm that pretty?

I've never told anyone this before, but I'm very self-conscious about my looks. Being born with only three arms has been a major hurdle in my life, but I've battled through it. I'm nothing if not persistent!

Ha! Do you remember that time you were on Drumthekos face-to-face with the last of the Anchrola and I landed right in between

you both, demanding to know why you were refusing to answer my calls and you told me that your communications must have been having problems and I checked them and found they were working perfectly and you admitted that you'd probably just been too busy to take the call because the Anchrola wanted to kill you! And then the Anchrola said that actually you'd both been not up to much and he distinctly remembered hearing the ringing, but that you'd tried to turn it off!

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden" <calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 05:19 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re re: re: re: There you are!!!

lol indeed!

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitrnail.net,

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 05:21 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Yes, I suppose I am quite rich now. I’m no Third Moof or anything,

but I suppose I do okay.

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 05:22 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Oh, you absolute tease! You know perfectly well what a Moof is,

silly! Besides, three planets is quite respectable, isn’t it? But what would we need with money, my dearest, when we have the whole

universe at our fingertips!

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 05:25 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Anything, my wonderful, wonderful Doctor-puss. You can ask me

anything. What’s on your mind?

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2037 05:36 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

He? But Charley’s a female of the species, isn’t she?

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabriao5@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 05:48 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Oh, my goodness! I’m no fan of the girl, but I never thought she’d

end up in jail. What happened?

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 05:59 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

With a plastic bucket?!

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 06:10 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

My poor, poor little larva. I understand how you feel, truly I do.

Having that mousey little girl follow you around like that must have been so distressing! (And let me tell you, she put quite the

dampener on our romance at times.)

But now you're FREE! We simply must celebrate!

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 06:24 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Oh. I see.

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 09:45 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Yes, I'm still here. I'm busy.

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 10:29 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re:

There you are!!!

I simply fail to understand why you would go to all that effort to try and get her out of jail. She has been nothing but a source of

annoyance and frankly, good riddance to her.

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 200710:37 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re:

Oh, I want us to be together too, CW, CW, CW!!! I KNEW you

were just playing hard to get.

186

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 11:01 PM

Subject: re: re: re:

Twenty-five thousand pounds? Pounds of what?

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 11:17 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Oh, it’s a currency! How many Hacknots is that?

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 200711:20 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Twenty-five thousand Hacknots?! Just to file the right paperwork?

Are you sure? My darling, I’m the Fifth *Moof*. Not a Weeblit. Isn’t there some other form of payment that these people would accept?

187

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net.

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July o9, 2007 11:23 PM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Well, I don’t know. This planet doesn’t sound terribly advanced.

Perhaps they still covet mineral deposits.

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Monday, July 09, 2007 11:27 PM

Subject: re: re: re:

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

Oh, how amusing. I just noticed that Earth only has 24 hours in a

day. How charming! It's not even lunchtime here.

188

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Tuesday, July 10, 2007 05:08 AM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: There you are!!!

I just went shopping with Munoulia. Oh, Clouds of Trint Save Me!

When I told her that you and I were back together again she insisted we go look at wedding tassels. On Goros? She has to be crazy. Ugly

great things were all we could find and when I did eventually find

one I liked it didn't even fit!

I'm so depressed.

I want you to be stunned by my beauty, not made to feel nauseous

on our Fusion Day.

Oh, say we'll be fused, my darling Doctor! Say it! Please!

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctors@myspace.com>

Sent: Tuesday, July 10, 2007 05:03 AM

Subject: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re: re:

re: re: re:

I have another idea, my love. I can't tell you about it right now, but I don't want you to be mad at me. You'll get that gold. I promise.

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden" <calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Wednesday, July 11, 2007 00:53 PM

Subject: re: re: re:

deposit from out of the solar system. It is quite bizarre. We gave all of our details. IBAN number, the works. We even said the day and

time they could expect Group 4 to show up with the delivery, but

they just seemed baffled!

So my dearest, sweetest, darling, if you have a solution on how

we can get this gold to you so that you can free your mousey little

friend, please let me know. I'd bring it myself but I just sold my

190

yacht!

PS: Fathers are very annoyed. Tee-hee!

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Wednesday, July 11, 2007 05:19 PM

Subject: re: re: re:

it won't come to that.

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Wednesday, July 11, 2007 05:43 PM

Subject: re: re: re:

a little uncalibrated at the moment so relativity could be a bit of a factor. He says he should be there in 24 to 48 Earth hours but from

your end it might feel more like seventy or eighty years. Still, since you're a Time Lord he factored that shouldn't be much of a

problem.

If he can get it seen to he says he will.

It's on its way!!!

From: "Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden"

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: "The Doctor" <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Thursday, July 12, 2007 12:29 PM

Subject: re: re: re:

Dennis left with the shipment of gold.

Did everything go as planned? Is Charley safe?

192

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Saturday, July 14, 2007 06:04 AM

Subject: Did you get it yet?

My dear sweet Doctor, I spoke with Dennis and he says he

delivered the packages to your PO Box yesterday at around three.

Please let me know what is going on. Is everything okay?

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Sunday, July 15, 2007 08:48 AM

Subject: My darling?

I haven’t heard a word from you in a couple of days. Please reply,

I’m starting to worry.

From: “Calabria, Fifth Moof of Trebidden”

<calabria05@wrabbitmail.net>

To: “The Doctor” <doctor@myspace.com>

Sent: Tuesday, July 17, 2007 10:52 AM

Subject: Hello?

My love. Are you there?

She Knew

Nigel Fairs

An Adventure of Jonathan Smith, with the Third Doctor

It's not the sort of thing you usually see in a pub car park. Not even back then, in the days of glam rock, Space Hoppers and Curly Wurlies. I mean, maybe on *The Avengers*, but not outside the Speckled Woodpecker on the A5 on a Wednesday morning.

Mind you, I was so preoccupied with my own escalating fury that I might well have driven past it without a second glance. It can only have been a fortnight after The Great Break-up. Less actually, because it had happened on the Sunday, I'd moved out on the Monday, and we'd been due to go down to the cottage the following weekend, which neither of us thought a terribly good idea given the circumstances. But by the following Tuesday my poor friends were obviously sick and tired of me moping around their house – though they'd never dream of saying so – and I elected to take myself down to Wales after all.

Big mistake.

On the long drive down, I felt a sense of dread, which grew every time I passed a familiar landmark or chanced upon a Little Chef we'd stopped at on a previous visit. I began to ponder upon the delights that the cottage itself would offer me. With a heavy heart I recalled our every memento: that trip to Paris, captured in a casual snap, sitting, framed, on top of the piano; the piece of slate we'd smuggled out of the Llechwedd caverns and carved our initials on

like lovesick teenagers; the curtains we'd agonised over in Pwllheli market; the heavy black tongs his mother had donated from her

attic. And the portraits. *The portraits*. Every inch of the cottage would taunt me! Why the hell hadn't I arranged for Mrs Lloyd or

one of the parish ladies to go in and bin the lot? I very nearly turned the car around and fled home, but indulgent thoughts of drunken

weeping in the front room propelled me, darkly, towards

Llanfairfach.

The cottage looked wrong somehow. I wasn't used to getting

there in the dark; my partner's anal planning had always ensured a

mid-afternoon arrival, allowing us enough daylight to find the fuse

box, visit the local post office for supplies and settle ourselves down for a cosy evening in front of the fire. But I'd often stumbled across the little field from the Crown and Anchor, to be greeted by the

comforting lights of the cottage. So that wasn't it, I thought, moving down a gear in anticipation of the steep driveway to the back door.

It was only when I'd parked that I realised that of course that *was* it.

The cottage lights were on.

Someone was in.

My stomach cold with anticipation of the inevitable, I fished the

keys out of the glove compartment, crossed the achingly familiar

gravel footpath and opened the door. Or tried to.

A couple of minutes later my fruitless stabbing at the new lock

had woken Jessie, who was yelping excitedly from the kitchen. I

tried to placate her through the letter box, and was about to smash a window or force the door open when it opened.

Adrian. Hair ruffled. Eyes bleary with – what? Sleep? Tears?

Neither of us spoke as a frantic Jessie leapt into my arms and started to devour my face. I gurgled nonsense to her and then deposited her in her basket, kneeling to play with her.

'Basket?' I asked, without looking at him. We never took her basket to Wales, as it was the only time we let her sleep on the bed. A holiday treat.

'She's not well,' Adrian replied.

'What? Adrian, why on Earth didn't you let me know?'

This time I did glance at him, and for the briefest moment was melted by the light bags under his eyes, the sprinkling of white hair at his temples. He'd be grey by his fortieth birthday.

'It's not that bad,' he stammered. 'Just thought it'd be better to leave her down here at night, in case.'

I tutted, and ruffled Jessie's belly. She growled appreciatively. Stupid really, not to have checked with him beforehand. But it was too late to do anything about it now.

'I'll sleep on the sofa then,' I offered. 'Go home in the morning. I'll grab a couple of blankets.'

Adrian stepped briskly between me and the door to the stairs.

'Couldn't you stay at the Crown?' he suggested, eyes widening – as they always did when he wasn't wearing his glasses and had a point to make.

'I could.' I frowned. 'But I'd rather snuggle up here with Jessie. I can go first thing in the morning if it's really that unbearable to have me around. You don't even have to see me...'

‘It’s not that.’

And that’s when I saw the tray, laden with dirty cutlery – which

was unlike him for a start – two plates, an empty bottle of Cape Riesling and two glasses.

The Speckled Woodpecker was one of those spit’n’sawdust places that keeps a log fire burning all year round to impress the tourists. A motley collection of violin cases was suspended from the ceiling and the walls were lined with yellowing photographs of local cricket luminaries. Sunbeams sliced through the windows, illuminating a storm of dust as I pushed the heavy wooden door to.

A ruddy-faced barman was serving a tall white-haired man in a chequered red cloak.

‘I’m terribly sorry, I seem to have mislaid my wallet,’ the man apologised, and then, turning towards me, added, ‘I wonder, could you lend me a five pound note?’

I wouldn’t normally, to be frank. But there was a sense of weary intelligence in his face that endeared him to me somehow.

‘I’ll *give* you five pounds,’ I replied, ‘if you let me have a glass or two.’

I indicated the bottle on the bar.

‘My dear fellow, how very kind of you.’ He smiled, and stepped aside to let me complete the transaction.

Soon we were sharing a table overlooking the car park and I savoured the welcome taste of red wine on my lips.

‘Good night, was it?’ I asked, nodding at his evening dress.

He frowned for a moment, then, face clearing, shook his head.

'Not really, to be honest.' He rubbed the back of his neck thoughtfully.

'Me neither.'

I shudder to imagine what I must have looked like. I hadn't slept a wink. The sofa had been uncomfortable enough, but the thought of Adrian upstairs with someone else in my bed, less than a fortnight after The Great Break-up was enough to keep my heart pounding in cold anger for most of the night. And the fact that in all probability it was James Harris...

Even now, thirty years on, I feel a chill writing his name. It's odd to remember how excited I'd been to meet him for the first time. Described as one of the most talented young artists of his generation, his appeal lay less in his art – though that was admirable – than in his reckless, apparently boundless behaviour. The outrageously overt speech he'd made at the Tate, which some still insist lost him the Turner Prize a good 15 years later. The fevered rumours about his exploits in the dark underbelly of Ortonesque London. The daring self-portrait on that very loud and tuneless pop band's single. Adrian had had it signed and framed after their paths

had crossed so unexpectedly at the Leeds City Art Gallery. And none of our little crowd ever tired of hearing his animated description of Harris launching into a drunken tirade after Adrian had clumsily and short-sightedly sent a sculpture flying off its pedestal onto the floor. Its scattered pieces had become the

centrepiece of the exhibition and earned a new title, *Serendipity*, whose full relevance delighted those of us in the know.

'The funny thing is,' Adrian announced one night, from the kitchen, 'he reminds me of a sort of younger you!'

'Charming!' I exploded lightly.

'The way he really stands up for what he believes in,' he continued. 'Doesn't take any nonsense from anyone.'

I behaved like a gentleman when we first met. Harris was as good-looking in the flesh as he was in the magazines, but shorter than I'd imagined. Unruly blond hair cascaded over piercing blue eyes, which seemed to imply more experiences and deeper thoughts than his age would've allowed him. I complimented him on The Dithyramb, a series of bold oil paintings that I'd particularly admired, and, though hindsight has tarnished the memory now, took his wry smile to indicate a genuine interest in my theories about the Greek Chorus, a passing passion of mine. I'd even been delighted to accept, on Adrian's behalf, an invitation to join him and his partner for 'an extended lunch' in York, and was only mildly irritated when it transpired that I'd be abroad on the agreed date.

'Never mind,' Adrian cooed later, 'I'll go. It'll be good to do something to keep myself occupied while you're Site-hopping.'

That particular trip – a search for a certain collection of etchings I'd been promised were somewhere to be found in the Dordogne – had proven, though ultimately successful, to be a nightmare of missed connections, crooked dealers and unseasonably hideous weather. I'd even torn my favourite jacket. So when I came back to England to a house empty of anyone to regale with tales of spear-

wielding natives and thunderstorms, I wasn't best pleased.

The phone rang.

'Will you accept a reverse-charge call from a Mr Adrian

Bullock?'

'I'll accept a reverse-charge call from anyone!' I replied

gratefully, to be greeted with the surprising news that my other half had taken James Harris down to Llanfairfach and would I bring

down an extra duvet?

My mood didn't improve.

Maybe I should explain that our relationship wasn't in the best of

health by then. At the beginning we'd enjoyed a few years of

blissful, uninhibited passion, fuelled not only by the customary

vices of the day but by my unquenchable desire to capture him in

oil, pencil, celluloid and clay, and his equal desire to be captured.

His beauty, unblemished by the years, the focus of my entire

working, waking and sleeping life, started to define who I was. And

that was the problem. My obsession with Adrian as an objet d'art

wasn't matched by the critics or members of the public who

actually defined me, career-wise. The work dried up, the nagging

self-critical voice I'd ignored since boyhood became louder, and, to put it bluntly, I became hell to live with.

After a while I could barely even look at him.

Adrian didn't help matters. But then why should he? I found it

more or less impossible to talk to him about the whole depression

thing. I was very much a product of my family, who were adept at catapulting a conversation into comfortable banality the moment any emotion entered the room. He was equally as emotionally closeted as I was, having been adopted – the effect of which I'm sure lay at the root of his occasional outbursts of seething fury – and brought up by a slightly unnerving couple who'd advocated hard work as an answer to all of life's problems. As a result, Adrian worked and played hard, and our house, garden and accounts were always immaculate, my studio being the sole room where my chaotic personality was allowed free rein. He also had the habit of projecting every intolerable fear or desire onto other people. Thus, rather than admit that, in Portugal, he'd been shamelessly flirting with the bleached blond Pedro, whose similarly bleached friends had insisted on nicknaming 'Petal', Adrian had launched into a vicious attack on my suggestion that he might want to stay another week. How dare I suggest such a peculiar thing? Had I no faith in our relationship? He had a good mind to stay another week with Petal just to spite me...

Quite.

He hadn't, of course. We'd returned to our pristine house, retrieved Jessie from her grateful and exhausted dog-sitters and carried on as before. In separate bedrooms by then, because of the snoring problem.

Petal's ghost, however, rose again upon Harris's arrival in our lives. He'd apparently fallen in love with the cottage and was

determined to sell up and buy a property in Llanfairfach.

'Won't his other half object?' I suggested.

Neil was conspicuous by his absence.

'Oh, Nancy can have a little flat in Barnsley or something!'

Adrian drawled – by then he'd adopted Harris's dreadful habit of referring to our male friends as women, a common smokescreen in

those less liberated days, though one I refused to use, preferring to refer to asexual 'partners' or 'other halves'. 'She can come down for weekends!'

'Llanfairfach is hardly a vibrant centre of culture,' I objected, aware of Neil's sophisticated tastes. 'Now the Miner's closed there's only one pub, a church and a post office!'

We called the village's second pub 'The Miner' because of its raucous regulars, none of whom earned enough now to support it.

'They're reopening, didn't you know? Global's put some money into it.'

'It'll be hideous, then.' I grimaced. 'Full of suits and dullards!'

The workforce for Global Chemicals weren't exactly renowned for their charm and personality.

'At least it'll be more civilised than the Crown,' Adrian argued. 'That's full of Nutters these days!'

Thinking that I'd far rather spend the evening arguing with free-spirited members of the Nuthutch commune than being bored by Global non-entities, I abandoned the discussion in favour of a long,

hot bath.

None of this discouraged Harris, whose determination to infiltrate our lives seemed to grow daily. At the end of the week, my refusal to join 'Jenny and Nancy' for a weekend in York met with a stony silence from Adrian. Halfway home, as I rummaged through his rucksack for a packet of Toffoes, I chanced upon a small, handmade card. Obviously a Harris original. More out of professional curiosity than anything else, I started to open it, only to be screamed at by an incandescent Adrian, so furious at my 'intrusion on his privacy' that he nearly crashed the car.

'Is that yours?' I indicated the bright yellow car by the window.

'Hm?' The old man looked up from his reverie. 'Oh, yes. Bessie. My old faithful.'

I noticed his slight lisp for the first time.

'It's unusual.'

'Yes, indeed. Made her out of bits and pieces. She drives well. Gets me around, when I'm on... When I'm in the country.'

He sighed. Once again I sensed a heaviness about him. Rather like Harris, his eyes had a fullness, a richness to them. Unlike Harris, though, this man's lined faced conveyed less of a thirst for new experiences to match the old and more of an ache for an end to it all.

'Have you travelled much?'

He smiled wearily.

'Oh, yes, I've travelled.'

‘My other half loved to travel, but I’m more of a home-lover myself. Pipe-and-slippers man, me.’

I’ve no idea why I said that. For a start I’ve never smoked and as for a life of domestic bliss… Suddenly I felt the rage return, and took a gulp of wine in an attempt to quell it. Unfortunately it had the opposite effect.

‘I’m going to have to move soon, though. Very soon in fact.’

‘Really?’ the old man mused, gazing into the fire. ‘Yes, I might be moving on soon myself ‘

‘My other half’s left me, you see,’ I blurted out, feeling almost out of control. ‘For a younger model.’

He turned to look at me.

‘Said he was just like me, in fact,’ I continued, ‘which I suppose he is. In a way. He’s an artist too.’

My drinking partner nodded. I felt compelled to tell him everything. Maybe he was a psychiatrist, or a hypnotist or something. Maybe the evening dress was in fact a costume and he was on his way to a performance, not driving home from the night before, as I assumed. Perhaps the pantomime car was all part of the act.

‘It’s not been very pleasant, this last couple of weeks. I came down here to escape from it all, but they were there. In the cottage. We’ve got a little cottage in a mining village down here. The one that’s been in the papers – you know, there was a factory that exploded over the weekend. You must’ve seen it on the news?’

‘Yes, I did.’ The old man smiled. ‘You were telling me about

your, uh, other half?’

At the time I assigned his delivery of the expression a

significance that, in hindsight, I think was wrong. Far from a coded acknowledgement of my sexuality, I believe he was simply unused

to the term. It must have been a generational thing.

‘Where did you meet?’

His voice was calm and encouraging.

‘We met at work,’ I replied. ‘My other half was a student,

actually, and assigned to me at King’s.’

‘King’s?’

‘King’s College, Cambridge. I was a little bit of a celebrity, back

then. Top of my game. But to tell you the truth it didn’t really suit me, being the Artist in Residence. Too much paperwork, red tape.’

The old man nodded.

For a little while we sat in silence, the old man gazing into the

fire, as if recalling something from his own past, or maybe from the night before. Or maybe contemplating the future.

Then he broke the silence.

‘When I was growing up, there was a mountain. An enormous

mountain. And halfway up this mountain lived an old man. A

hermit. He was my confidant. My “guru”, you might say. Over the

years he said many wise things to me, but perhaps the wisest was

this…’

He fixed me with a stare that unnerved me for a second.

Something in his eyes was different.

'He said, "Of all the many universal truths, the one true constancy is that nothing is constant. Everything will change. Nothing lasts forever."'

For one peculiar moment I was struck by a bizarre notion: *You're not talking about yourself here*. As if this old man was immortal. He'd been sitting here by the fire since the dawn of time and would still be imparting words of wisdom to passing strangers as his inconstant universe exploded around him. Something about his eyes...

Suddenly I was crying.

'I tried to burn the cottage down last night.'

He looked up at me, surprised. 'Go on.'

Wiping the tears away, I remembered the numbing silence the night before, as soon as Adrian had handed me the blankets and skulked off upstairs. The galling sight of a front room stripped of everything relating to our years together. Light patches of wallpaper, unsullied by wood smoke, where the portraits had hung. And, worst of all, two large palms in a pair of gaudy orange pots. I recognised them immediately – Adrian and I had laughed about them at length on the way back from York a fortnight before, when we'd finally managed to secure a mutually convenient date for our 'extended lunch'.

'It must be a northern thing!' we'd screamed.

And now, here they were, the ghastly symbols of Harris's victory over me and invasion of the cottage. There was far worse to come in the ensuing months – the excruciating sound of Jessie locked in a

garage (‘James hates dogs. He wants her out of the house.’) and the torturous search for a flat in which I could legally accommodate her; the whole torrid business of them buying me out at the lowest possible price; Adrian’s insistence that I attend a family funeral, weeping uncontrollably for the loss not only of his sweet aunt but of our relationship; all the tears, tantrums and allegations – but I still think of that moment in the front room as the darkest of the whole business.

Even a freshly painted portrait of Adrian hung over the fireplace would have pained me less than those pots.

Resisting the urge to throw the wretched things through the

window, I tried to settle beside a sleeping Jessie on the sofa. An hour passed. Then another. As the first light of dawn started to glimmer over the slag piles of the abandoned mine – bizarrely bombed by the RAF the weekend before, as I later discovered – I hauled myself off the sofa and wandered over to the sideboard. Only a month ago, it had held a stash of emergency chocolate bars, single malts, assorted wines and cans of Cresta. Now, however, the treats had been replaced by all that was missing from the room. Paintings, photographs, the bit of slate, everything. I opened a drawer. It was stuffed with letters, old magazine articles and unframed photographs.

I had been consigned to the sideboard.

As I lifted a letter written on painfully familiar blue notepaper,

there was a loud sneeze from the room directly above. Not Adrian's sinusoidal implosion. Unmistakeably Harris's.

Suddenly wracked with sobs, I flung the letter onto the still glowing embers of the fire and watched, bewitched, as it slowly started to smoke, then, folding in upon itself, burn.

'I threw the whole lot on the fire. The smoke was horrendous. The dog went mad. But the funny thing is, there wasn't a word from upstairs. Nothing. They must've thought I'd gone mad. Must've been terrified!'

The old man nodded. 'I expect they were. Absolutely terrified.'

Another wave of tears hit me. 'I could never say it,' I stammered. 'That's what went wrong. My stupid family... I mean, there were the paintings and the presents and all the domestic stuff, but I could never say, "I love you." If only I'd *said* it. It might never have ended. And now it's too late, I've messed it all up. I'm such an idiot.'

He let me cry for a little while and then I was surprised to hear his voice crack slightly as he leaned towards me and said:

'She knew.'

There are so many things I could've said to that, but I didn't.

Outside, the sun disappeared behind a cloud, casting a shadow over his face as he continued:

'I think I know why you started that fire. You were hurt. You were furious. You didn't know how to put those feelings into words. I'm much the same, believe it or not. Oh, I can tell a pleasant little anecdote about my childhood, or about wonderful places you

could never even imagine, but when it comes to how I feel... how I *really* feel about my... my...'

He paused. I was entranced.

'I've lost someone myself, you see,' he admitted eventually. 'Last

night, in fact. A very dear friend. I watched her change. Outgrow me.'

'Outgrow you?'

'Yes. And in a way, I was responsible for it. She's happy now. Very happy. She's found her future, here. And I must move on...'

I was surprised to see that he was on the verge of tears himself

'I've done it before. I've lost so many friends over the years. And I've never been able to tell them how much... how much they've meant to me.'

'How have you coped?'

'Well, I haven't tried to burn down their houses!' He smiled.

I smiled hack wryly, blushing.

The sun reappeared, filling the room with light.

'I think they knew, really,' he continued, having drained the last of the wine from his glass. 'They all knew how I felt about them. We couldn't have gone through everything we did together without knowing. I could see it in her face last night, truth be told. She knew. And so did your other half.'

He stood.

So did I.

Offering his hand, he said, ‘It’s been a pleasure to talk with you, sir. Goodbye.’

I watched him move towards the door, buttoning his cloak, turn to smile briefly and add, ‘Thank you.’

And then he left.

As he started up the pantomime car and reversed onto the road, I noticed that he was still smiling. And so was I.

It was only then that I realised that neither of us knew the other’s name.

Funny how talking to a stranger in a pub can change your life. Or, at the very least, make you think about things in a different light. I’ve been back to the Speckled Woodpecker several times, but I’ve never seen the car or the stranger again. Maybe he moved on. Maybe he died. Whatever his name was, wherever he came from.

The Glarn Strategy

Brian Dooley

An Adventure of Martin Stowe,

with the Fourth Doctor and Romana

He was the best estate agent in the area. He rocked, he was the dog’s – all the usual commendations. No matter how much pressure Martin Stowe had lately been under, or how much anyone strove to undermine him, that was one thing he could cling to: he was brilliant at his job. If he focused on that one simple fact then he could get through the day. Work would be his salvation.

Or so he thought. When two oddball customers walked into his office that morning they brought a change even more drastic than the turmoil of the last few weeks.

Martin Stowe could tell what a customer was looking foe as soon as he – or, as Martin very much preferred it, she – walked in. She might not agree with his original assessment. She might have her heart set on a garden flat in a Victorian conversion. But by the time Martin had finished with her she was in love with the third-floor maisonette in an ex-council block that he'd been trying to shift for more than a year – he liked to think she was a little bit in love with him too. She'd get the property for a price that suited both her and the seller. Everyone was happy. Martin was often even invited to both house-warming parties. Or the maisonette-warming in one instance, if you chose to be picky.

He was the best estate agent in the area and Jason McGee at Haversock Laing could kiss Martin's latest plentiful 'Sold' signs if he tried to claim otherwise. So when the crackpots sauntered in, the pair of them obviously as mad as you please, Martin thought he had them sussed in seconds. Okay, things had been getting a bit stressy lately. Tense. The whole team was affected. Sheila and Indira were like wild cats, hissing and spitting at each other over the tiniest thing, and Martin couldn't avoid being dragged into their rows. Despite normally regarding work the way an alcoholic does a bottle of sherry, he had lately found himself pining for a break from it all. Things had become that stressful. But his powers had not been

dimmed by all the upheaval. He still knew exactly which property

the weirdos were after as soon as he clapped eyes on them.

The trick, he found, was to sort customers into types. Everyone likes to think they're such an individual but most people, Martin believed, were stricken with a herd mentality. Almost everyone

conforms to one group or another. Work out which group someone belonged to – it was normally obvious from their clothes alone, although a quick chat helped narrow it down – and you had their tastes and lifestyle tapped. It was then just a question of leafing through the filing cabinet and bringing out the right property details. That was how he always went about things. Until the cranks walked in. Martin was the first to spot them. Sheila twitched in her seat as soon as they passed her desk and Indira had made her way from the kitchen the moment she heard the door go – it wasn't just that they wanted the custom: any distraction from that other business was gratefully leapt upon – but Martin had caught the pair's eyes first by standing and waving as they came through the door and so they made a beeline for him.

Martin looked them up and down as they approached. Everything about *him* – the crazy hair, the pretentiously long scarf, the tatty coat – screamed out, 'Look how arty-farty I am!' Martin guessed he wrote novels – all of them unpublished. He'd met non-novelists before. They liked to corner him by the airing cupboard during a viewing and describe their rejected plots to him in bewildering detail. But, on further scrutiny, this bloke seemed worse: he looked like he wrote pretty. That was it! He was a poet, who probably wrote long turgid verse sagas based on Celtic myths – and always after several pints of home-brewed ale. Of course that was never going to pay the mortgage – or even for the home-brew kit – so he had to have a proper job too. Uni lecturer, Martin guessed, in

something like pottery or fine art.

Yep, that was the man summed up: he lectured in the university's art department.

God knew what *she* was doing with him. She looked quite respectable at first. Bit of posh – and gorgeous with it. Long brown hair, great figure. The dress was a bit glam for daytime but it showed plenty of cleavage so Martin wasn't complaining. She had to be crackers, of course – she was with the poet. Martin would have put her down as a kept wife – she had the air of a woman untroubled by practicalities – but doubted the man earned enough to keep her. She probably worked at the uni too, as a secretary or something; maybe an artists' model. She was too fit to be a lecturer, at any rate. When he described her later to his mates, the best way to sum her up would be to say that he most *definitely* would.

205

Having got a good measure of the couple, Martin mentally ran through the available properties. They'd want somewhere they could restore. They were that type. Somewhere a bit countrified – definitely somewhere old. He knew the very place. Dove Cottage was a dilapidated old ruin that had been on the market for almost two years now. As the couple made their way from the door to his desk he tracked down Dove Cottage's file.

'You don't need to say anything,' Martin told the pair, laying the relevant details, facing them, upon his desk. 'This is what you're looking for, isn't it?'

The woman furrowed her brow. ‘What is it?’

‘It’s a house, Romana,’ said the man. ‘You’ve seen houses before. Although, looking at it more closely, it’s actually a cottage – and you’ve *definitely* seen one of those. Lovely old Amelia had one – Amelia Rumford? You went inside it and had sausage sandwiches!’

‘Oh. I thought he was offering us the document. So the properties are stored in flat images, rather than taking up too much space on the shop floor? That’s clever. I didn’t think Earth technology was so sophisticated yet.’

Definitely a nudey model rather than a secretary. The woman was completely wacko.

‘ *Psssst!* ’ said the man, huddling closer to the woman, although he made no attempt to lower his voice. ‘Not *yet*. Don’t say *yet*. In terms of time travel, knowing about a *yet* is rather a giveaway – and we are here undercover.’

Martin revised his original assessment. These two were nothing to do with the university. They were straight from a mental ward. And if they weren’t, then it was high time they were sectioned.

The man had straightened up and now gestured for the woman to deal with Martin.

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘We’re past *hellos*,’ said the man. ‘I know we didn’t get one when we came in – this young chap was too keen to show off his sales patter – but Earth custom has it that once you’ve started a conversation to suddenly go back and drop in a *hello* looks odd. We don’t want to look odd. Just get on with it now – never mind

hellos.'

'To get straight to the point...' the woman said.

'Self-defeating that, I think,' the man cut in. 'To tell someone you're getting straight to the point isn't to get straight to the point at all – it's to put the point off by some way while you announce you're getting to it. We're wasting precious time, Romana, with all this getting to the point – the whole world is at stake. Perhaps the 206 galaxy. Don't faff about with unnecessary preliminaries. Just get to the point!'

The woman turned to Martin and did so. 'Has anything at all strange happened here today?'

'Other than talking to you two?' Martin muttered.

' *Well, of course other than talking to us two!* ' bellowed the man.

Martin was sure he could see Indira smirking across the room. She was loving this. 'This is a house shop, isn't it? What's so strange about a man and his... his... his delectable wife –'

The woman raised an eyebrow at the description.

'– walking into a house shop and wanting to look at houses? If you find that strange, chum, then I'd suggest you're in the wrong job. No, I mean much stranger than looking at houses in a house shop. Much, much stranger. Odd messages? Electronic ones, that is – texts, emails? I think we can ignore semaphore or carrier pigeons.'

'Unless the bird was an automated replica,' the woman pointed out.

‘Bit early for that. By, um –’ the man checked the clock on the wall ‘– by about thirty years. A few more species will need to lose their natural habitats before that becomes common practice.’

‘That’s an awful amount of *yets*, Doctor...’

‘I’m not sure where we stand regarding Aldis lamps,’ the man mused, ignoring her. ‘There’s an electrical component to those, of course, but...’

‘Not digital.’

‘Quite! As Romana says, not digital. Let’s not worry about any communication you’ve had via an Aldis lamp. So! Weird messages – have you had any? Goads, taunts? Stuff that eats away at the very heart of your psyche?’

Martin sat down. He hadn’t meant to, but he did. The man’s eyes were so intense as they stared upon him. And how did he know? He’d described *exactly* what had been happening these past few weeks. Something *had* been eating away at Martin’s soul.

Sheila and Indira drew near, clearly hoping the mysteries that had plagued them were finally about to be solved. The atmosphere in the room grew chill.

The strange man’s tone – the cold, deadly seriousness of it – told Martin that whatever had been gnawing at his very sense of self, keeping him awake at night for fear of what he might dream, filling his daylight hours with worry and suspicion, had even darker and more terrifying motives than he ever could have suspected.

‘Yes,’ he told the man, plainly and simply. ‘Yes, strange things

have happened.'

207

'Then, don't worry,' said the man, 'because I'm the Doctor. And I'm here to help you.'

Martin couldn't quite remember when it had all started but he knew that the texts came first. They were all from numbers he didn't recognise – he assumed they were from his competitors, maybe Jason McGee at Haversock Laing, or even disgruntled customers – although he couldn't imagine anyone was unhappy with his services.

'U r nothing,' they tended to read. 'U think u r something but u r not.'

It was kids' stuff, really; playground insults. They unsettled him a bit, he supposed. No one likes to think they've made an enemy. He would sometimes text back: 'Who is this?' There was never any reply.

But the texts were easily dismissed as a minor irritant, nothing more. Of course he was something. He was the best estate agent in the area. It was when the emails started arriving that everything turned nasty.

For a start, there were names attached. These weren't cowardly, anonymous insults any more. Someone had taken the trouble to setup not just one, not even a few, but hundreds of different email accounts. The names seemed perfectly innocent – Janet Harper, Keith Norris, Shreela Patel – and he opened each message

expecting a customer enquiry.

At first they were mere continuations of the texts.

Dear Martin,

Know this: you are nothing.

Love

Lily x

Martin,

You think you're something special but you're not.

;)

Cheers

Karl

You really rate yrself dontcha? Wanna know something?

I dont.

I dont rate you 1 bit

Mason xxxxxxxx

Martin went through all his files to see if the names corresponded with anyone he'd had dealings with. They didn't. He emailed back but, as with the texts, didn't receive any reply. And still the

messages came. To begin with, the content didn't bother him as much as the sheer volume, which considerably interfered with the working day. That very quickly changed.

The first to upset him was from one T. Jones. He'd had a call from a Tom Jones only days before. It wasn't a name he was likely

to forget. Martin had dithered about cracking the predictable 'Not *the* Tom Jones' gag, as it was one which could offend certain sensibilities; but if he didn't make it then he could just as well seem po-faced to many others. Martin prided himself on knowing how to handle his customers and had eventually judged from the man's dour manner that it was probably best not to inject a note of humour. It was a preliminary enquiry, sounding out all the local agents, and it seemed to go well. Martin assumed the bloke had since decided to place his property with him at Morgan Heggarty and was emailing now to ask what happened next.

He distractedly sang the chorus to *Delilah* as he opened the message.

'Dear Martin,' it read. 'All your life you have been haunted by the thought that you weren't enough of a man. You don't think your father ever loved you as much as he loved his other sons.' Martin stopped singing. Who *was* this? 'I think you were right. I don't believe he did. Yours sincerely, Thomas Jones.'

Martin barely had time to react when another email pinged into his inbox. This one was from an Otis Matherson.

'Dear Martin, It has come to my attention that both your parents view you as a disappointment. You are the least loved of all their children because you have done least to make them proud. You didn't win a place at Oxford like James. (Or should I say, "Dr James"?) You weren't a great sportsman at school like Luke. (Oh, he filled the house with trophies!) You tried to be a charming jack-the-lad like Andrew, but you just don't have it in you. (He could

flunk as many exams as he liked, he was always going to be your mother's favourite.) What makes you special? Nothing. You have to work every hour you can to make any kind of headway in the world. Your parents know that. They call you "the plodder" behind your back. So plod, plod, plod your way through the day, Martin. It won't make any difference. Regards, O. Matherson.'

He was about to fire off a contemptuous reply when the phone on his desk rang. 'Morgan Heggarty – Martin speaking.'

'Plod, plod, plod, plod, plod.'

'Who is this? *Who is this?!* '

The line went dead. He dialled 1471 but the number had been withheld.

'Trouble?' asked Sheila, looking up from her paperwork.

Martin thought she'd asked it a little too knowingly. Sheila was one of the fixtures at Morgan Heggarty. She'd worked there for most of Martin's lifetime, having arrived straight from school. She and Martin always used to get along fine. Until her divorce, she'd been a good laugh but the breakdown of her marriage had turned her bitter and she was taking it out on everyone. There was a sly delight whenever anyone else came a cropper. Could she be behind these messages? Had she grown that spiteful? He knew she couldn't have made the call but that didn't mean she hadn't put someone else up to it. He told her to get on with her work, determined not to give her the satisfaction of seeing that she'd riled him.

Another call came: 'Plod, plod, plod.'

He was ready to tackle Sheila about it. But he was sure she didn't know that Jim had been at Oxford. He never told anyone that. It wasn't a source of pride for him as it was with his parents – quite the opposite. It made him feel like he hadn't quite matched up so he preferred never to mention it. And how would she know Luke had been victor ludorum at every school sports day? He had never told her so. No, it *couldn't* be Sheila. She had looked over once more as he slammed down the receiver and this time his attitude softened.

'Wrong number, that's all. Some crank.'

'Oh, God – not you as well? I've been getting them for days now. I've been thinking it was Stuart – I wouldn't put anything past that man – but why would he want to have a go at you?'

Martin shrugged. 'I've never even met the bloke.'

'Count yourself lucky! No, it doesn't make sense. Stuart's got no issues with you – you were never married to him. It *was* your direct line that went, wasn't it?'

'Oh, yeah – not the general. There's been no mistake. It was meant for me, I know it was. You don't think it's someone at Haversock Laing, do you? I mean, if things carry on as they are doing, this'll be the third month in a row we've beaten them on sales.'

'Oh, come off it, Martin – we're two local estate agents, not rival Mafiosa gangs. Are you expecting to wake up with a lopped off 'For Sale' sign on your pillow? This isn't a business thing. Like you say, it's probably just some crank. We shouldn't work ourselves into such a state over it. I'm gonna have an Options – d'you want

one?'

'Hm? Erm... yeah – a toffee one, please. And you're right – it's likely just some mentalist with time on their hands... Nothing more than that.' He knew it wasn't. As Sheila went off to the kitchen, Martin checked his inbox once more. There were six new messages. They were all on the same theme, describing the current attitudes of 210
his ex-girlfriends. The first five were a torrent of spite and wounded pride that were no more than the clichéd and expected reactions of the jilted: cheap slurs on his endowment and sexual prowess that annoyed but didn't wound him. So what if his exes sat cackling with their friends about him now? He was the one who had ended each relationship: it was sour grapes on their part, nothing more. But the detail in the messages bothered him and the sixth was an entirely different matter.

'Laura lied. Whenever she told you that she loved you, she lied. All the time that she was with you she was still trying to get over Paul. You kept the loneliness at bay, that's all. You were someone to hold her when things became too much to bear, but in her heart she was never holding you. That aftershave she bought you for your last Christmas together was the same one that Paul used to wear. She missed the scent of him so much, even after four years with you. She tried to love you but she found it impossible. Nothing that you shared meant anything to her.'

It was from a Daniel Naylor. Who the hell was he? Martin hammered out an angry reply, telling 'Daniel Naylor' he knew

nothing. *Nothing!* Of course Laura had loved him. *Hadn't* she?

'We've run out of toffee, so I did you a Turkish delight. You might have to mush the powder up against the side with your spoon – I don't think it all dissolved.' Sheila put the cup on Martin's desk and tapped his arm. 'Are you okay, son? You're as white as a sheet!'

'I could do with something stronger than hot chocolate, that's for sure. Sheila, I know this might make me sound paranoid, but... are you getting weird emails as well as the phonecalls?'

Sheila put her drink next to Martin's and sat on the edge of his desk.

'I am, as it goes, yes. Horrible, nasty, vindictive stuff Like I say, I just thought, "Oh, that's Stuart," and shrugged it off. Or *tried* to... What do some of yours say, lemme see...'

'No!' Sheila was already peering around at his screen, so Martin clicked to hide the window. 'I'm sorry, but...'

'It's too personal?' She nodded. 'Same with mine. That's why I can't believe it's some random nutter – or anyone at Haversock Laing. Whoever's behind this business is too well informed. It's disturbing me now.'

It was disturbing Martin too; it all cut far deeper than a silly prank call. His years with Laura were the only time in his life when Martin had felt valued and understood – when it hadn't mattered how much money he made, or how many of his competitors he beat, but only how kind he'd been, how patient, how caring. Laura had

loved the better part of him. It sometimes felt as though she alone ever knew that better part existed. If he were to believe that her feelings had not been sincere...

Sheila was toying with the spoon in her mug of hot chocolate.

She asked if Martin found it odd that the calls only seemed to come when Indira was out of the office and the pair of them were alone. They were clearly dealing with someone who knew them well and Indira had been part of the team for two years now.

Martin considered this. It was true that Indira was ambitious. And Sheila had always insisted that she held a torch for Martin. Indira had told her as much when she first started and had been disappointed to hear that he had a girlfriend.

'Hell hath no fury like Indira scorned?' suggested Sheila.

'But why wait all this time to take it out on me? And why would she want to have a go at *you*? What have you ever done to offend her?'

'I don't know. These aren't the actions of a rational mind, that's for sure. All our workloads are up with Peter being ill – perhaps she's cracked?'

Martin thought it unlikely. 'Indira doesn't know half the stuff that crops up in the messages to me. It's not like we've had many heart to hearts.'

'I suppose.' Sheila chinked the spoon against the side of her mug for a while. 'Martin... you don't think we've got a ghost?'

'Er... no, Sheils. I really, *really* don't.'

‘But all that weird gunk up the walls of the basement? I know the

fella said it was a snail infestation – but we never found any snails.

What if it was *ectoplasm*?’

‘You watch too many shows on the inaptly named Living, Sheila.

All those programmes about the dead…’

But she had spooked him and when the phone suddenly rang

again, Martin let it ring.

‘You should answer it,’ said Sheila, despite having jumped at the

sound. ‘It might be a customer, after all. We can’t let this sicko get to us, whoever it might be.’

It was the fear of who – of what – else it might be that made

Martin wait another three rings before plucking up the receiver.

‘Morgan Heggarty –how can I help you?’

‘It could have been anyone,’ came the voice. ‘You just happened

to be there. Laura needed not to be alone, that’s all. As soon as she was strong enough, she saw you for what you are. And moved on.’

The line went dead. Martin held the receiver to his ear, loath to

replace it in case it rang again. The ringing of Sheila’s phone broke the silence.

She caught Martin’s eye before she answered it. ‘Morgan

Heggarty – Sheila speaking.’ Her face drained of colour. ‘Does this

give you some kind of perverted thrill? … Is that why you ring us? I pity you, I really do, if this is the only way you can get your fun.

Shall I tell you what colour knickers I’m wearing, will that get you off? … Who is this? … Answer me, damn you! *Answer me!* ’

Both numbers were withheld. There was a sudden flurry of

electronic pings as emails flooded both Sheila and Martin's inboxes.

'Delete them,' Sheila urged. 'Delete everything you get!' She yanked the wire of her phone from its socket. 'I'm not putting up with this!'

No sooner had she disconnected the phone than her mobile began to pulse and trill as it was hit by a tide of incoming messages. The vibrations forced it from the desk onto the floor, where it continued to ring and thrum across the carpet, like some pernicious mechanical bug. Martin switched off his own before it could do the same.

The door buzzed to alert them that someone had come in and Sheila let out a scream. It was Indira returning from a viewing.

'Whatever's been going on here?' she demanded, dumping her briefcase and rushing to comfort Sheila. 'Is this you, Martin? What have you said to her?'

'Oh, so *that's* your game, is it?' said Martin. 'You're making me out to be some kind of nutter so Peter's job'll be yours.'

'What are you on about?'

'You want to be branch manager– we all know that– and you know I'm serious competition. You're trying to freak me out, affect my performance. I don't believe you, Indira! I always knew you were ambitious but to exploit Peter's illness like this?'

' *What!?* All I'm concerned about is Peter's well-being. I haven't given a thought to his job!'

Sheila pulled away from Indira and bent to scoop up her now silent mobile.

‘Funny how the phone hasn’t rung since you came back into the office,’ she said. ‘How no emails have arrived. It’s like I said, Martin – she’s the one behind these messages. God, Indira, you’re sick!’

‘Messages?’ said Indira. ‘You mean the crank calls? You’ve been getting them too?’

‘Oh, nice try,’ said Martin. ‘Playing the victim too. But as Sheila says, it’s strange how the calls and emails never come while you’re here.’

Indira’s phone rang. All three tensed.

‘You’ll want to answer that,’ said Martin. ‘I’m sure it’s only from

a customer. What are you up to, Indira? Trying to send us two barmy so that when Peter pops his clogs and his job comes free you’ll be the only sane candidate? An OTT way to get promoted, don’t you think?’

Sheila was disgusted. ‘Poor Peter. He was only moved to the hospice last Friday!’

‘Yes,’ said Indira, ‘and when did the weird calls start? Long before then. I’m not listening to this paranoid nonsense!’ She snatched up the phone. ‘Morgan Heggarty – how can I help you?’ She flinched. ‘Enough of this. Enough! I’m hanging up right now and I am calling the police!’

Martin and Sheila were unconvinced but then the room was

immediately alive with electronic alerts as all three of them were bombarded with further messages.

'That's it,' said Indira. 'It's time the police dealt with this.'

'We don't need to drag those idiots into it,' said Martin. 'I can handle things.'

'Something to hide?' Indira picked up the receiver and dialled.

The police never came. Indira and Sheila registered complaint after complaint but it was as though their calls had been lost in the ether. No help of any sort came. The emails and phonecalls continued, if in less of a frenzy than they had that afternoon. Martin did his best to ignore them, to carry on with his work as normal, but the atmosphere of fear and mistrust persisted. Sheila began to prattle on about gremlins and poltergeists and Indira barely spoke to either of them, stung by their accusations. Someone, somewhere was out to get him, Martin was sure of it. They were playing with his mind, driving him to madness. At times he even doubted if Sheila and Indira were receiving the weird messages and weren't bluffing to cover their own conspiracy against him. He felt as though he couldn't trust anyone.

Then the Doctor and Romana walked into the office and Martin knew, as soon as they asked about the messages, that everything was about to change. What he didn't know was if things were set to improve or become ever more unbearable.

'I see,' said the Doctor, once Martin had described the situation. 'And all the messages have been in the same spirit?'

'Yes,' said Indira. 'Cruel, spiteful stuff.'

‘But nothing we can’t handle,’ insisted Martin.

‘Speak for yourself,’ said Sheila. ‘This whole business is making

me ill. I’ve hardly slept, my eczema is back...’

‘Don’t worry,’ the Doctor told her. ‘I’m here now.’

Martin bristled. He resented the implication that this Doctor was

their saviour – as though they were unable to handle things alone.

‘And who exactly *are* you? You don’t look like the police.’

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor.

‘Perhaps they’re plain-clothes,’ suggested Sheila. Martin gestured

towards the Doctor’s long scarf. Sheila took the hint. ‘Maybe not.’

‘We’re not subject to any Earth authority,’ said Romana. ‘In fact,

in this matter, we’re acting entirely independently.’

‘What are you on about?’ scoffed Martin. “Earth authority”?

What other kind is there?’

‘None that can tie me down,’ bragged the Doctor.

‘There’s the White Guardian,’ said Romana. She smiled politely

at the others. ‘We were meant to be locating the fifth segment to the Key to Time –’ she said this gobbledegook phrase as naturally as if

she’d been pointing out that they were due to stop off at her

mother’s but the Doctor doesn’t like to have a job –’

‘It’s not a *job*! It’s a task, an errand...’

‘It’s a *job*. A very important one. The Doctor has problems with authority – it’s deep-seated insecurity, manifesting as arrogance –

so he’s doing all in his power to avoid it.’

‘Anyway,’ said the Doctor. ‘We’d said ta-ra to Tara – ha ha! – and were plotting the next coordinates when I happened to go into hover mode above the Earth...’

‘In the early twenty-first century,’ Romana pointed out, ‘at a time when, as any historian knows, Earth was subject to an *exceptional* amount of alien invasions. Nestenes, Cybermen, Daleks...’

‘Don’t list them, Romana!’ The Doctor thrust his fingers into his ears. ‘I mightn’t have saved the Earth from all of them yet! You’ll cause untold damage to the web of time if you give me what amounts to a set of tip-offs.’

‘ *Hmmm*. It’s a good job you avoided Earth history at the Academy – and failed the few modules you did sit – given how often you come back and save this soggy planet!’

‘ *Pfuh*! “Failed”! A fail in theory is neither here nor there – what use are theories to anyone? I never fail my practicals and that’s what counts! I’m not going to fail these good people now.’

Martin stared at them incredulously. ‘You are both completely barking!’

‘No,’ said the Doctor, ‘just easing you in gently. Romana and I are, as you’d understand it, aliens. But entirely benevolent. Well, *entirely* might be bending the truth. *For the most part* benevolent. I am prone to moods – it’s my genius temperament. As I say, I was hovering above the Earth when I noticed there was a non-terrestrial power source at work in the British Isles – well, more specifically, this office.’

‘You were spying on this office?’ Sheila was horrified. ‘Not the *toilets*?’

‘No. Well. Your soap dispenser’s almost empty – that showed up on the scan. Must remember to switch that setting off. And take my own soap with me if duty calls. But I thought I’d better land and take a look.’

Martin had heard enough. ‘Are you really trying to suggest that you’re some kind of alien, who –’

‘Hear him out, Martin!’ snapped Indira.

Martin was stunned into silence. She couldn’t be taking this imbecile seriously?

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor. ‘Where was I? Oh, yes! The abusive messages you’ve received, the written attacks, the barbs and hate and spite – it’s all of alien origin. The sooner you accept that the sooner you can stop putting unnecessary obstacles like disbelief in my way and the sooner I can go about saving your planet.’

‘We shouldn’t have left K-9 in the TARDIS,’ said Romana, before explaining to the others, ‘He’s our robot dog. He would have been able to confirm what the Doctor says.’

Martin shook his head. ‘Your dog is a *robot*?’

‘Funny,’ said the Doctor, ‘I would have expected you to be more impressed by the fact that he can talk. Ah, well. Yes, my dog is a robot.’

‘Madness!’

‘Then how do we know about other planets,’ asked Romana, ‘like Tara?’

‘Tara! Doesn’t even sound like a planet – it’s the house in *Gone With The Wind*.’ Martin caught Indira looking at him askance. ‘My mum made us watch it every Bank Holiday. And anyone could invent vaguely plausible names for a planet.’

‘Go on, then,’ challenged the Doctor.

‘Um… Zaxos, Hexonane, Quibblibob Five…’

‘Not bad guesses. Although there are only four planets in the Quibblibob Sisterhood.’

‘So what planet are you two from?’ asked Sheila.

‘Gallifrey,’ the Doctor and Romana answered together.

‘Huh,’ said Martin, ‘that is so unlike a planet’s name that I’m almost tempted to believe you!’

‘I *do* believe you, Doctor,’ said Sheila. ‘On all counts. I believe you’re alien, I believe your lady friend is too. I believe your dog is a talking robot. Most of all, I believe whatever’s got it in for us is not of this world.’

‘Yeah, but, Sheils,’ said Martin, ‘you were the one who thought

we had a ghost.’

‘And that’s not such foolish reasoning,’ said the Doctor. ‘She at least acknowledged that what’s happening here can’t be explained by current human understanding. That’s all your myths and folklore are – ghosts, angels, fairies – an imaginative attempt to plug a gap. But some people are too arrogant to admit to any gap in their knowledge. And they’re the ones who remain blind to the gravest

threats because they just refuse to see them.'

That shut Martin up.

'It knows too much,' said Sheila. 'Like it can see inside our heads.'

'Well,' said the Doctor, 'it can observe almost everything that comes out of your heads in the form of communication and then it's just a question of piecing it all together to create an impression of what's inside. What about you others – are you convinced yet?'

Indira nodded. 'I've tried and tried to make sense of what's happening here and no ordinary explanation's sufficed. And... I don't know. I just feel I can trust you.'

'You can.'

Indira smiled, relieved. 'So what do we do next?'

'Next?' asked the Doctor. 'Oh, next I save the world and you all watch.'

'That,' says Martin, who was liking the Doctor less with every word that came out of his mouth, 'remains to be seen. This is our planet. Tell us what the threat is, and we'll protect it. I'll protect it.'

'That's the spirit!' said the Doctor, missing Martin's challenging tone. 'I think I'm beginning to suspect the motive behind all this.'

'Only now?' asked Romana. 'I would have thought it was obvious.' She turned to address the humans. 'Has interpersonal tension increased in this office over the last few weeks?'

'Has it!' scoffed Sheila. 'We've been at each other's throats. Much more than usual.'

‘Ever since the text messages and emails started?’

Sheila nodded. ‘They made us suspect one another.’

‘I’m not going to suggest we’re the best of friends here,’ said Indira. ‘We’re colleagues. But there’s always been a basic level of trust between us.’ She eyed Sheila and Martin disapprovingly. ‘That seems to have evaporated over the past month or so.’

The Doctor nodded grimly. ‘You’re being used as a testing ground. Something intends to invade this planet and is monitoring how you respond to its methods.’

‘I told you so,’ said Indira.

‘No, you didn’t!’ said Martin. ‘When – and please back me up on this, Sheila – did you claim that the messages were coming from

Mars?’

‘I said that they weren’t from *me*!’

‘And they wouldn’t be from Mars,’ said the Doctor. ‘Martians couldn’t text with those cumbersome claws.’

‘But why *us*?’ asked Sheila.

‘Random sampling. As with so many of life’s miseries, there’s no particular reason why it’s happening to you. So don’t let it affect you further by taking it personally.’

‘Doctor,’ said Martin, ‘if you’re to be believed, some alien nasties have singled this office out from the entire planet to use us for their experiments. It’s a bit hard *not* to take that personally!’

‘Then you’ll just have to try harder. We need all our wits about

us.'

'Okay. But how are they managing to access all our phones and email accounts?'

'Ah, well, that's an easy trick. Any fool could do it.' The Doctor ferreted in his pockets. 'I'm a genius, of course, so I'm hardly proving my point when I take this little gizmo –' he'd extracted what looked like a particularly small mobile from his pocket '– and rap out a sequence like so!'

A shrill whine sounded as the Doctor tapped the device's buttons. The others put their hands to their ears. The Doctor soon stopped tapping and the whine came to an end. The silence that followed was quickly broken by a *ping!* from Martin's computer. He had a new email.

'Shall I check it?'

'Of course!'

Ping! and *ping!* Sheila and Indira had received messages. They rushed to their own computers to check them. Their mobiles buzzed along with Martin's as texts were also received. The messages all read:

'Happy times and places! Lots of love, the Doctor xxxxxxxxxxx'

' *Hmf!* ' said Martin. 'That figures. My mum's always said you should never trust anyone who signs more than one kiss – they're after something.'

'Then your mother is a terrible old cynic who's probably denied herself lots of fun.'

Romana was at Sheila's side, reading the Doctor's email over her

shoulder.

‘Oh, marvellous work, Doctor. I’m sure everyone is suitably impressed. I’m also sure that “everyone” includes whoever has invaded the system. You’ve just let them know that you’re here.’

‘Ah. By signing my name, you mean? Well, it could be a message from the local GP – that’s an Earth term for a medic, by

the way, Romana.’

‘Is it usual, or even ethical, for doctors to sign messages to their patients with love and a row of kisses?’

‘If it isn’t, it should be! You’re worse than Martin’s mum, Romana –such a stickler for petty propriety.’

‘You’re avoiding the real issue, Doctor. These creatures can assess the situation here in a moment. You’ve just used offworld technology to access the communications system. They will know you’re on to them. I wouldn’t be at all surprised if they moved straight to the next stage of their plan.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor glumly. ‘Well, I did say any fool could do it.’

There was yet another *ping!* from Martin’s computer. He checked his inbox. ‘Doctor,’ he said, ‘you’ve got a message.’

‘I have? It’s addressed to *me*?’

‘Yep. From someone called “Yankom Gunslash”.’

‘They obviously no longer feel the need for anonymity,’ said Romana, as the Doctor took Martin’s place at his computer.

‘Yankom – that’s a Glarn title, isn’t it?’

The Doctor nodded distractedly. He was reading the message. His face was ashen. Martin watched as all the Doctor’s previous confidence drained from him. So much for all his extravagant claims of having come to save them. Martin had endured weeks of taunting from these creatures. The Doctor had crumbled after just one message.

Indira joined Romana. ‘What’s a Glarn?’

‘Oh, they’re only this galaxy’s most skilled tacticians and the rulers of a vast interplanetary empire. They are huge intelligent molluscs – over six metres in length – and they have never developed weaponry. Their might lies in their powers of manipulation and propaganda.’

‘Huh!’ said Sheila. ‘Sounds like my sister, Doreen. Not the propaganda bit – I doubt she’d even know how to spell that.’

‘They’re also immensely adaptable,’ continued Romana. ‘They provoke other species into wiping themselves out and then move onto their devastated planets, wholly unconcerned by any radiation or fallout.’

‘That’s Doreen’s approach to other people’s marriages. Not that divorce turns people radioactive…’

‘Hang on,’ said Indira, still processing what Romana had said. ‘Snails are molluscs, aren’t they? The walls of our basement were covered in slime trails but no snails were ever found…’

‘They must have sent a scout to reconnoitre the premises,’

reasoned Romana.

219

Sheila threw up into her waste-paper basket.

‘But how do the Glarn provoke a species to destroy itself?’ asked

Martin. He was still half watching the Doctor, who now closed the

message he’d been reading, shook himself back to some semblance

of his former self-possession, and answered:

‘You’ve seen for yourself all the trouble the Glarn can cause – the

doubt and mistrust and fear. You all reacted on a limited scale.

Bickering increased, nervous tension levels rose... I’m guessing that you all to some extent withdrew from normal social behaviour. Am

I right? Stopped emailing friends or forwarding jokey texts? You

put aside any attempt at casual banter and restricted all

communication to what is necessary for work – yes?’

Martin nodded.

‘The Glom will be aware of that. They’re monitoring all

messages in and out of here. They know how you’re reacting to

their taunts. But imagine what will happen when their operation

goes global and nation turns against nation. And they will, once the Glarn get to work. They know exactly what to do now, following

this trial run. Deliberate disinformation. Rumours of arsenals being amassed that don’t really exist. Lies about the nature of various

cultures’ beliefs. Easy stuff for the Glarn – and sure to set sabres rattling amongyour quick to anger species.’

‘So,’ said Martin, ‘the Glarn are basically intergalactic [edited]?’

‘I’m sorry,’ said the Doctor, ‘that last bit wasn’t translated.

Perhaps it’s currently thought to be vulgar – the TARDIS can be an

awful old prude in certain time zones.’

‘ *Troublemakers*. They’re intergalactic troublemakers?’

‘Ah! I can guess the word she missed out. And it’s exactly right!

That’s just what the Glarn are! And terribly good at it too.’

‘If the Glarn see the Earth as a prime location,’ said Romana,

‘then, I assure you, they could take it with ease. Your only hope is the Doctor.’

‘Then we’re done for,’ said Martin. ‘I saw your face, Doctor,

when you read that message from Gunslash. It got to you, didn’t it?

What did it say?’ He moved towards his computer but the Doctor

grabbed his arm.

‘No! Please don’t. It was in the same vein as the messages to all

of you. Working away at hidden fears. I’ve allowed you your

privacy. Please allow me mine.’

He stood and left the desk. But his previous proud posture had

gone. His shoulders were rounded in defeat. The women looked to

him in hope. Martin looked on with pity. The curly haired fool was

no use to any of them. Martin would have to step in.

‘It’s a good job we don’t need you, Doctor,’ he said. ‘Look at

you! You haven’t got the backbone to handle the goading. But I

know exactly how to deal with these Glarn.’

‘You do?’ asked Romana, obviously impressed.

‘Yes – salt. That’s how I’d wipe out snails and slugs in my garden, it’s how we’ll obliterate the Glarn. We’ll get onto the government, tell them to contact Russia, or whoever owns all the big salt mines, and get them to coat the whole planet with salt. As soon as the Glarn land they fizz up into mush! Problem solved. Well, apart from all the mess. Am I a genius or am I a genius?’

‘The third option,’ said the Doctor. ‘You’re clutching at straws.’

‘Oh, you think so, do you?’ challenged Martin.

‘I know so. The Glarn won’t invade in person when they can do it all remotely. That’s the beauty of the wireless office – you can do your job from the comfort of your own home.’

‘Then why did they send a scout to check the place out?’

‘Probably just fancied the trip. You could learn all you want to about Fuengirola by flicking through a brochure, doesn’t mean you wouldn’t still want to go there on holiday.’

‘I wouldn’t,’ muttered Sheila. ‘It’s where I had my honeymoon. Once bitten…’

‘And you’re wrong about the Doctor,’ Romana told Martin. ‘You do need him. As much as it pains me to admit it, the whole universe does. Although I like to think that I’m quickly learning to be a more than adequate replacement when he retires. Which can’t be far off. He isn’t getting any younger…’

‘ *Huh*,’ said Sheila, ‘who is?’

‘Well, the Baltramaje of Kute are, as it happens,’ said the Doctor. ‘And ignore Romana – unless she’s paying me compliments. She

just resents that, being young, she's still shamefully inexperienced. I'm in my prime and I'm not going to let you good people down. Or Martin here.'

Perhaps it was a joke to lighten the mood – Sheila and Indira certainly laughed – but Martin didn't appreciate it. He was determined to find out what had scared this Doctor so.

'The Glarn don't need to invade,' said the Doctor, 'because all they have to do is stoke up fear and you'll wipe yourselves out for them. That's all aggression is, deep down. It's fear. Fear that someone, or something, is better and more powerful than you.'

'It's true,' said Romana. 'The Doctor can be appallingly sarcastic if ever I correct him or offer information of my own.'

'Romana, has no one ever told you that simply agreeing with a perceptive remark doesn't make you appear perceptive?'

'As he has just ably demonstrated.'

' *Pah!* Every creature in the universe is aggressively guarding its 221 DNA, ensuring that it survives through the ages. Running in fear from anything with longer claws or sharper teeth. Or better strategies.'

While the Doctor was distracted, showing off his greater knowledge, Martin took the opportunity to sidle back to his desk.

'The Glarn tap into insecurities,' said the Doctor, 'and nibble away at them, provoking aggression. Of course, humans don't just protect their own species. They jealously protect their country, their city, their family – themselves. The Glarn know that. They're

exploiting that.'

Martin searched through his trash folder. The message from Gunslash to the Doctor was there. He clicked to open it. He wasn't prepared for what he read:

'You were responsible for their deaths.'

There was nothing more. The Doctor had known exactly what it meant. Martin had seen how he'd reacted to it. That awful haunted expression. People were dead because of the Doctor. Martin knew they'd been too quick to trust the man. Checking that he was unobserved – the Doctor was expounding further on the Glarn's methods, if only to make the same points in different ways – Martin typed a response.

'Whose deaths? The Doctor.' The previous row of kisses seemed inappropriate in context.

The reply was almost instantaneous. Martin had had the good sense to turn off the sound alert so no one noticed as it arrived in his inbox. He opened the message. It was a list. Name after name after name, scrolling on and on, seemingly into infinity. A list of the dead. All of them dead because they met the Doctor. A few names leapt out at him, some of them strange and alien:

'Temmosus... Katarina... Bret Vyon... Sara Kingdom... Edward Waterfield... Toberman... Viner... Gemma Corwyn... Shura... Aggedor... Professor Clegg... Rogin... Ronson... Laurence Scarman... Skinsale...' The names continued to pour down the screen as, propelled by rage, Martin left his seat and seized the

Doctor's shoulders.

'I knew we should never have trusted you!' He span the Doctor to face the others. 'This man's a killer!'

The Doctor's voice was hushed: 'You shouldn't have read that message. It was part of the Glarn's tactics. They want you all to lose faith in me.'

'Who *are* they, Doctor?' Martin demanded. 'All those names – all those people? How did you kill them?'

'I didn't. I just wasn't able to save them.'

'Will you be able to save us?' asked Sheila.

'Of course he won't,' said Martin. 'We'll have to save ourselves – and we *will*. We don't need aliens coming down here and saving our planets for us. First we contact the army...'

'Like we tried to contact the police?' asked Indira. 'The Doctor's told you, the Glarn have tapped into the phonelines. They can stop any communication out of here. Stop all this alpha-male rubbish, Martin, and hear the Doctor out!'

'That coward? What use is he? He's too scared to take decisive action.'

'Oh, Martin!' boomed the Doctor. 'You are wonderful!'

'Yeah, all right, pal – don't get sarky.'

'Sarky? I've never been more sincere in my life. We will all admit to being scared of *some* things – Macra, Daleks...'

'The terrible Taran Wood Beast!'

‘Really, Romano, you need to see more of the universe. There are far scarier things than that out there!’

‘You didn’t actually see it, Doctor.’ She shuddered.

‘Well, no – that’s true. But it’s our secret fears that can prove our undoing. The terrors we won’t acknowledge, not even to ourselves. They lurk at the back of our minds, dismantling our confidence and strength. But if we drag those things out from the darkness and face them for what they are then we can learn to arm ourselves against them. So thank you, Martin. You’ve made me admit to my real fear – that the help I claim to offer isn’t guaranteed. That lives might be lost in the fight against more visible enemies. You all know now that tackling the Glarn will be risky –and that takes the pressure off my shoulders. I don’t have to reassure you otherwise.’

‘And that’s a good thing?’ sputtered Martin.

‘Anything that helps the Doctor work at full power is a good thing,’ said Romana.

Sheila suddenly blurted out: ‘I’m scared that if Stuart knows I love him then he’ll take me for granted and stop loving me! There – that’s my greatest fear.’

‘I don’t see,’ said Martin, ‘how we’re going to save the world on the basis of knowing that!’

‘Well, those creepy Glarn can’t get at me now – can’t send me any more of their nasty messages. Everything they’ve sent’s been about me and Stu. “If you tell him you love him, he’ll run a mile.” “Say you’re lost without him and you’ll scare him off” I’ve done what the Doctor said we should do – I’ve put my biggest fear out

there – so there's nothing else they can exploit. I love that man.

This is Stuart, I'm talking about – not you, Doctor. Sorry. I've

always been too terrified to show it in case he beggared off on me. I know we've ended up divorced as a result, like – but I think that's

what's been keeping him keen.'

Indira put her arm around Sheila. 'No, Sheils – *you've* kept him keen. Just *you*.'

Martin, regretting having snapped, put his arm around her other

shoulder. 'You'll be okay, Sheils.'

' *A-ha!* ' said the Doctor. 'The Glarn have underestimated you.

They've been too cynical – like your mother, Martin, with her

mistrust of kisses. They've focused on humans' willingness to fight

but they forgot one thing: how well you bond in adversity! Fear can

cause aggression but it also stirs up sympathy! When another's fears are the same as our own – not being up to the job in hand, or

worrying that we'll never be truly loved – we don't hit them. *We hug them!* ' He looked at Romana, standing apart from the group.

'Or those of us who've spent enough time around you lovely

humans do!' He threw his arms around the cuddling trio. 'We're

going to beat the Glarn and *no one* is going to die in the process!'

'Martin,' said Romana, turning to face him, 'what's your biggest

fear?'

'Tell me yours first.'

'I already have done – the terrible Taran Wood Beast'

'And we all know Martin's biggest fear,' said Indira. 'It's

obvious. He's terrified he's not the hotshot he likes to think he is. Scared his big ideas about himself are just to comfort him from the truth. Isn't that so, Mart? You should drop the façade. We all know you're a softy underneath. Some of us even quite like your soft side.'

'Are you a softy, Martin?' asked the Doctor. 'I'll let you into a secret – so am I!'

Martin laughed at the redundancy of the 'confession'; on the evidence so far, the Doctor was the most sentimental person that Martin had ever met – and he greatly admired him for it

'Okay, I admit it. I love this planet and I love the people on it. And, if there's anything I can do to stop it, I'm not going to let some intergalactic slug wipe us all out.'

'The slug angle is rather a red herring,' said the Doctor, 'if you'll pardon the mixed metaphor. The Glarn are more like squid.'

Martin didn't care. He was hatching a plan. 'The Glarn think this planet is ripe for invasion on the basis of how this office has responded to their attack – yes? They've seen that we've become edgy and withdrawn and quick to respond in anger – yes? They've seen that we've cut ourselves off from our friends – yes?'

The Doctor grinned and nodded furiously. 'Yes?'

'So we respond differently. We reach out to everyone we know. We shrug off the insults, act like we're not bothered and... and...'

'You have fun!' said the Doctor, punching the air.

‘I’d have got there eventually,’ grumbled Martin.

‘Of course you would,’ said the Doctor. ‘So here’s what we’re going to do...’

The counter-attack had to come in the form of texts and emails, since they were what the Glarn were observing. The Doctor told the humans to find anything they had that would send out the message that they were happy and full of fun, and unconcerned by the Glarn’s attempts to rile them, and forward it to everyone they knew.

Sheila was already going through her folders.

‘Doctor, a lot of the stuff I’ve got here is quite blue. Mainly from our Doreen – she’s always been on the brassy side. Doesn’t seem right, somehow, saving the world with smut.’

‘Anything that might bring a smile to someone’s face, Sheila – anything at all – you should pass on!’

‘You do realise,’ said Romana, as Sheila merrily clicked away, ‘that humour is very often an act of aggression in itself?’

‘Oh, yes,’ beamed the Doctor, ‘and highly effective in crushing pomposity, opposing sanctimony, and blowing a powerful raspberry at anyone who takes themselves too seriously. The Glarn won’t cope.’

‘I can’t believe we’re doing this,’ said Martin, forwarding a collection of amusingly captioned risqué snaps to everyone in his address book. ‘We’re saving the world with spam!’

‘ *Martin!* ’ blushed Indira. ‘That last one was pure filth – and you’ve sent it to all of your customers!’

‘So? I’d rather lose business than lose the planet.’

‘I suppose so,’ said Indira. ‘I’ll send it on to mine.’

‘That’s the spirit!’ boomed the Doctor. He had doodled a variety of cartoons and now rushed to the scanner. ‘When you’ve sent everything you’ve got you can load this lot up! How are you getting on, Romana?’

She looked up from the notepad that she’d been drafting a joke upon. ‘Quite well, I think. I’m rather pleased with this one: “What did the Algronostron say to the maintenance drone?”’

‘I don’t know,’ said the Doctor, ‘what did the Algronostron say to the maintenance drone?’

‘“Your gravitic panels are too wide”!’

Nobody laughed, and Romana’s self-satisfied smile soon faded.

‘I think perhaps the references are too obscure,’ said the Doctor, treading gently around her obvious disappointment. ‘Humans won’t get it. This particular Time Lord didn’t get it – and I’ve been around a bit.’

‘Well, you see, the Algronostron has mistaken the Drone’s detection discs for…’

‘No, Romana. If a joke has to be explained then it wasn’t worth telling in the first place.’

The computers began to ping with new emails.

‘The Glarn?’ asked the Doctor.

‘No,’ answered Martin. ‘These are all from mates.’ He skimmed

the most recent. ‘A few “LOL”s and smilies... Wavo wants to know why I’ve been ignoring him... Macca’s having a party on Saturday...’

‘This one’s from Stuart,’ said Sheila, ‘saying he’s touched that we’ve got to this stage – where we can share jokes, no acrimony...’

Indira was choked. ‘My dad has got back to me. After all these years...’

‘This one’s from Jim,’ said Martin, ‘my big bro. He’s a doctor, you know. Says I just lightened a particularly tough day at his surgery. I really should tell him how proud of him I am... He was always the one with the brains.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said the Doctor. ‘Has he ever helped to save a whole planet?’

He was fiddling with the small device he had used earlier and grinning broadly at the results it gave him. Romana read the tiny screen over his shoulder.

‘All Glarn activity in the area has ceased,’ she said, but not with the expected note of triumph. ‘And I never got to try out my joke on them.’

‘Probably just as well,’ said the Doctor. ‘They might have died laughing. As it is, this has been a bloodless war – and that’s always my favourite sort!’

The Doctor and Romana agreed to stay on for half an hour or so. Sheila made them all an Options. Over his drink, the Doctor regaled them all with tales of other planets he had saved. Martin had to hand it to him, the man was a marvel.

‘I don’t suppose you could stay even longer, Doctor – help us out with a few problem properties? If anyone could shift Dove Cottage, you can.’

‘Why would I want to sell an old wreck like that to some poor unsuspecting punter? *Although*... what would be my commission?’

‘You already have a job, Doctor,’ said Romana, draining her drink and rising. ‘The Key to Time, remember?’

‘Oh, don’t call it a job, Romana. I don’t have a job. I just do favours for people.’ He stood too. ‘Thank you for the delicious drink, Sheila. I might pop back and have another some day soon.’

‘You’d be welcome any time!’

The Doctor waved to the humans and then strode out of their lives. Romana smiled fondly after him. She really was quite beautiful when she dropped the ice maiden act, thoughtMartin. And he knew now that pining after Laura was pointless. He caught Romana at the door as she was about to leave.

‘ *Erm*, Romana, before you go, I was wondering... could I maybe take your number?’

‘My number? Which number? My atomic mass?’

‘Your phone number. I thought, perhaps, I could call you some time...’

‘Oh, I don’t think so. You’d never reach me. We’re likely to be very far from here in future. And also in the future in future. I hope you’re not offended – I’m simply being practical.’

‘And,’ said Indira, who, annoyingly, had earwigged in, ‘I think you’ve had enough trouble from extraterrestrial phonecalls for a while, Mart – don’t you?’

Romana offered her hand for Martin to shake. ‘Goodbye.’

And then, without so much as a peck on the cheek, she was gone.

Sheila was on the phone as he passed her desk. He heard her say: ‘Stuart, love, come back home… This time it’s for good, I promise.’

He joined Indira in the kitchen, where she was rinsing all the used mugs.

‘Oh, heck, Martin.’ She sighed. ‘What are we going to do about all our clients? We’ve sent them heaps of trivia and filth.’

‘Who cares about them, Indi? Do you? Let them fret about putting down roots, getting a mortgage, worrying how secure they’ll be fifty years from now. I can’t be bothered with all that any more. The Doctor’s right. It’s not what life’s about. “*Carpe diem*,” my brother, Jim, used to say. It’s Latin – he was always the brainbox of the family.’

‘I know what languague it is, Mart. I imagine most people do – and what it means: “Seize the day.”‘

‘I always knew how it translated. But I don’t think I ever understood what it meant. I do now – thanks to the Doctor. Let’s carpe a bit of diem, shall we?’

‘How d’you mean?’

‘I know today’s changed everything – I can feel it. My life won’t ever be the same again. But it’s a bit too early to decide what comes next. For now, let’s just shut up shop and go to the pub!’

Salva Mea

Joseph Lidster

An Adventure of Luke Tillyard,

with the Eighth Doctor, Charley Pollard and C'rizz

Okay, so you want to know why I'm here? Well, I've got a story to tell you. It's real. It happened to me. Was I the hero? Sort of.

What do they call that big space in the station? You know where Smiths and that are. The concourse? Yeah, that sounds about right.

Well that's where it started. The concourse in King's Cross station, on 7 July 2007. I'm sitting there, devouring this ham-and-cheese baguette thing and listening to Faithless tracks on my mp3. As per, the board is showing all my train's details except the platform number so I'm just sitting waiting for that really. Every once in a while, I glance up at the big News 24 screen. That was the day of the Live Earth concerts so that's all they were showing. You remember. Let's stop global warming by having a big party. Yeah, whatever. Of course, I don't recognise any of the bands. Well, you don't, do you? Not when you're so old.

Oh, yeah, forgot to mention that My name's Luke Tillyard and I'm old. I'm thirty.

So, yeah, I can't tell the difference between the Kaiser Chiefs and Kasabian and Keane or whatever. I'm blocking out the concert and the Tannoy announcements and the chattering sheep staring up at the board, with lovely soothing Faithless. *Salvo Mea* blasting into my

headphones reminding me of uni and V98 and Teletubbies and all sorts of 'I ♥ 1997' type stuff. Reminding me of the days when life had been fun. And I'm wearing a suit. Yup, I'm that old and past it. Actually no, I'm wearing the suit because I'm heading home for my granddad's funeral. Oh, thanks, but this is ages ago now. Am I over it? I dunno really. Do you get over things like that? Thing is, he was old and old people tend to have a habit of dying but... yeah, we'd been pretty close.

Granddad was called Ronnie but I called him Granddad, of course. He'd had some life. Fought on some ship in the Second World War. He told me about it once but that kind of black-and-

white stuff all blurs into one really, doesn't it? In the 50s, he'd moved to New York with Nan and Aunty Moira. They're both dead now, as well. He worked for the British Consulate there. Whenever I saw him he'd be telling everyone stories about how he was a spy and that. Then, when it was just me and him, he'd tell me that his actual job was to hand out the Ferrero Rocher at the ambassador's receptions. *Eccelente!* He was messing about, of course, but that was him all over really. We had the same sense of humour. In fact, we were similar in loads of other ways as well. My dad was born in New York but moved back to England in the 70s. He met my mum, got her up the duff and they had me in '77. Nan and Granddad came back over in '82 and me and him got on straight away. Mainly, I reckon, because he didn't treat me like a five-year-old. He swore in front of me and everything. As I got older, though, I think we were

close because neither of us were particularly good at the whole family thing. You know what I mean? At parties, everyone else would be doing the whole 'Do you remember that Christmas when...?' and 'Doesn't she look lovely in that hat?' and just making lots of noise. Me and him, though, we'd be outside, sitting on the doorstep, looking in. He'd always have a glass of whisky and a cigar and we'd sit there, not saying much because that's what we were like. It was always the opposite of an uncomfortable silence.

So, yeah, when Dad phoned me in London to say he'd died, I was sad, I guess. Couldn't get out of work until the day before the funeral. Funny that, isn't it. I had to go to HR and they told me that a grandparent's funeral qualified for one day off. A parent or a spouse and you get as much as three days. I guess that's what a life is worth these days.

So, yeah, I'm sitting in King's Cross, waiting for the 13.37 to Doncaster. WHSmith's carrier bag, stuffed full of magazines I wouldn't normally read about films I'd never see, resting between my legs. Heavy rucksack digging into my shoulders. Picking flakes of bread off my Primark suit. And I'm watching the endless stream of old people and foreign students milling around and I'm just wishing they'd all be quiet for like just one minute. Why do they all feel the need to talk all the time? I try to push my earphones into my inner ear to block out the babbling. Still, I'm thinking, at least I'm by myself so I can just listen to my music and –

'Er, hello?'

Dramatic irony really gets on my wick.

So I turn to the person who's interrupted my life and I smile

politely as I take out one earphone. It's a girl. Woman, whatever. She was pretty cute. Very old-fashioned, though. Her dress was like something out of *Twin Peaks* and her voice was all mummy bought me a pony.

So I turn to her and smile politely. Not too politely, though. I don't want to encourage her. And I say...

'Hi?'

And in the second before she replies, my mind is racing through what she wants to ask me. That's a problem I have, you see. I think too much. Always have and always will. Does she want the rest of my baguette? No, she doesn't look like a tramp. Money? Her clothes look very non-Primark. A cigarette? She'd be outside with the rest of the lung-destroyers. My phone number? Ha ha, yeah, right.

'I need your help.'

I'm just staring at her, blankly. I don't want to be rude and I don't want to be friendly and why can't she just leave me alone?

'Please. I'm alone here and I really need your help.'

I try not to sigh as I take out the second earphone. Sister Bliss replaced by the sound of trains and cagouled Italians. I ask her what the problem is. She grabs my arm and I realise it's serious. All these people crammed into one station and we're all very careful not to touch each other.

'Look, love, I'm sorry but I'm just waiting to catch a train.' And I nod over at the two policemen ambling down the platforms with their guns. 'The police are probably your best bet.'

She's shaking her head and telling me I don't understand. 'It's C'rizz.'

'Bless you.'

She's looking irritated. Like I'm annoying her now. Well, tough, I'm thinking. You should have chosen someone else to bug.

'It's C'rizz,' she repeats, gripping my arm tighter.

Okay, now I'm getting annoyed. I try to stand, which knocks over the carrier bag, sending magazines and aftershave samples scattering across the floor. I'm trying to pull away and I'm hitting someone behind me with my rucksack. The two policemen are seeing what's going on and they're coming over. Remember, commotion and rucksacks in train stations aren't exactly popular these days. The girl, woman, whatever, sees the policemen and grabs me. Two hands around the side of my neck. And before I can pull away, she's lunging in and kissing me. Full-on. Now, I'd have never thought of myself as a bloke who could be distracted by something like that but, yeah, I was. So I stop struggling and I'm kissing her back and, who cares if all I can hear in my head is a voice screaming about femme fatales and Hitchcock movies. After what seems like hours, she's pulling away and we're both turning to see that the police have wandered off. Some old woman is tutting at

us, which makes us both smile. Dammit, she's drawn me in!

'Who are you?' I ask her.

And before I know it, she's telling me her name is Charley. She

travels through Time and Space – you could actually hear her capitalising them. She travels with one alien called the Doctor and another called C'rizz. And that's it, she's rattling off explanations and stories about how the Doctor's a Time Lord and C'rizz is a reptile-man thing and they go about visiting other planets, generally getting into trouble but enjoying it because all three are the best of friends and before I can even smirk at the stupidity of what she's telling me, she's suddenly sad. Sad like you can't get near.

'But, C'rizz has changed.'

My brain is screaming at me to get away from her but the kiss and the clothes and the fact that I've got ages until my train mean I end up asking her what she means.

'He's... gone mad. Or something. He's trying to kill me.'

And I'm just looking at her. Trying to see if she's crazy. People on the telly can always tell when someone's crazy. But she isn't. I don't know how I know, but I'm looking at her and I can tell she's not. And, you know, I'm finding that I'm almost possibly starting to believe her.

'Where is he now?'

She's looking around. And suddenly she's gasping and I'm turning to what she's looking at and over by the cash machines I can see the two policemen. And they seem to be having a lie down.

And now my heart's beating like anything and we're both desperately looking around the station and I ask her again.

'Where is he?'

'Behind you.'

And, you know, it wasn't her who answered. Well, of course you

know. It's what always happens in stories, isn't it? I really shouldn't have asked. And I really shouldn't have done what I did next.

I turn around.

He's big. Not like a giant or anything. I think even in King's Cross people might have noticed a giant. But, yeah, he's a big bloke. Easily over six foot and towering... no, looming is the word. Looming menacingly! He's dressed in some kind of beige overall thing and he's built like a bouncer. And his head... it's grey with scales or something. And it's tilted to one side like when someone in a soap is doing psycho acting. And he's smiling and he's looking at me.

'Oh, Charlotte,' he's saying. 'You really shouldn't have run away. But I see you've brought me a new one to save.'

And I'm almost laughing because he looks the way he does but

his voice is like really posh. Like Charley's. In fact, he sounds a bit like my dad. Then I stop almost laughing because he's started snarling and that's really rather terrifying. I mentioned he was a big bloke, yeah? A big alien, grey-skinned, scaly reptile man looming menacingly over me and snarling. With his head tilted to one side.

So that's it! I've got to be the hero! I jump to my feet, pushing Charley to safety and I swing my arm round and knock him out with one punch. All the sheep staring at the board have turned to look and have started applauding and I'm standing with one foot on C'rizz's chest and I've got my arm around Charley and she's kissing me and everyone's clapping and on the News 24 screen the

band at the Live Earth concert are playing suitably romantic music.

And roll credits.

What? You don't believe me? Pah! Well, okay, what I actually might have done is squealed and closed my eyes but that's not what the heroes in stories do, is it?

So I'm sitting there, my eyes closed, feeling the alien breath on my sweaty forehead and I'm praying to God and Allah and any other deity I can think of.

And then I'm noticing that the station has gone quiet. And for a second there's silence except for Enrique Iglesias wailing from the news screen. Great, that's my end credit music. And then the screaming starts. It seems that people have finally noticed what's going on.

And they're all rushing to my help! Everyone's joined in! It's just like the bit in the *Spider-Man* film where all the New Yorkers band together and –

Yeah, all right. That never happened either.

I'm opening my eyes to witness the quickest evacuation of a train station this side of the Second World War. Everyone's screaming and running and they're leaving me and Charley to our fate. Got to love that Blitz spirit! Charley's looking at me and she's screaming as well. Which is odd because she doesn't look like the kind of girl to scream. And it's not very femme fatale. C'rizz is still looking down at us and he's still snarling. God knows why he's not attacking us or eating us or whatever he's planning on doing.

Hooray, he's a sadistic reptile monster man!

'Oi, C'rizz!' Suddenly a voice shouting. 'You really going to waste time on humans when you can have Time Lord?'

I'm turning to see where the voice is coming from. The station is empty, now, which looks weird. Empty except for this guy stood outside Boots eating a chocolate orange. He's dressed like a bit of a prat, to be honest. And he's got mad hair like he's used to moshing. Other than that, he just looks like a bloke. You know, normal.

Except, there's something about him. I've no idea what but there's something magical about him. Like he's old and young and human and alien and everything. It's like he's always been standing there but it's also like he never stands still. And he's looking at me and he's winking.

'The Doctor?' I find myself asking Charley.

'Oh, thank goodness!' she replies, practically swooning.

Then she's gripping my hand and pulling me to the floor as C'rizz launches himself over us and runs towards the Doctor. I look up to watch as the Doctor doesn't even flinch. He just throws his half-eaten chocolate orange at the big lizard monster man. The chocolate hits the alien in the face and he falls back onto his bum. Charley's smirking at this but when she sees me looking at her, she stops and starts to wail again.

'Doctor! What are we going to do?' she cries.

And he just grins and tells us to stand back and watch.

And that's what we do. We watch as C'rizz and the Doctor fight

You've seen *The Matrix*, yeah? Only the first one? Well, you're not missing much, then. But, yeah, remember how in it Keanu and the

others were like gods? You know, running up walls and along

ceilings and that? Well, it was like that. C'rizz and the Doctor were swinging from light fittings and sliding across floors. The Doctor

hiding in Subway and throwing baguettes at C'rizz. C'rizz lifting

the Doctor above his head and throwing him into the timetable

board. Sparks flying! Lights flashing! And they're chasing up and

down platforms, jumping over tracks. And the Doctor's sliding

across the length of the concourse on my purple WHSmith's carrier

and he's crashing into C'rizz, sending him flying into some luggage

trolleys. C'rizz pushing the trolleys across the concourse towards

the Doctor, narrowly missing me and Charley as we hide behind the

flower stall. The Doctor jumping on the trolleys and sliding with

them into a wall then jumping off and launching himself at C'rizz.

The aliens crashing to the floor and they're rolling around, trying to pin each other down. And I'm just watching. Just... amazed at what

I'm seeing. And I glance up at the News 24 screen, which has now

cut to the breaking news of what's happening in King's Cross

station, London. And there's me, on the screen. Somehow the BBC

have got a live link to the CCTV cameras and I'm realising that the

whole country is watching us. And I'm terrified but... feeling more

alive than I think I'd ever felt before. And I'm not sure how all this even happened. I'd just been sitting there, waiting for a train! And I'm almost smiling but then I see on the screen that C'rizz has

pinned the Doctor and is throttling him.

And I remember the trouble we're in. Me and Charley. If C'rizz

kills the Doctor then we're next. And, right now I'm thinking that I don't want to die. I'm only thirty!

So I'm looking at Charley and I'm seeing she's gone. She's done a runner! And I'm turning towards the Doctor and C'rizz and I'm standing up and I'm alone. And I can see the Doctor's face turning white and blue. And all I can hear is him gurgling and C'rizz snarling. And I'm trying to think of what I can do when suddenly C'rizz is shouting at the Doctor.

'I told you to be quiet! You know what the noise does to me!'

And the Doctor is looking at me and gurgling and gasping out two words.

'Save me.'

And I'm standing there and I'm terrified. I just don't know what to do. And nobody's coming to help so unless I do something, this Doctor bloke's dead. And then me. And I don't want that because my parents are only just about to bury my Granddad and it would kill them if they had to bury me so soon after. So I'm thinking. I'm desperately thinking of what I can do. And then, suddenly, it's like everything clicks into place. You know, real lightbulb 'ding' moment. Save me. *Salvo Mea*. The noise. C'rizz going mad because of the noise.

Save me.

And I'm running towards them, reaching for the two earphones dangling from a wire around my neck and I'm jumping onto the

alien's back and, as he stands, trying to throw me off, I'm ramming the two earphones into his alien ears and I'm letting go and I'm turning the volume up and... and suddenly he stops moving. I jump down quickly as he falls to his knees, his eyes so wide and he's muttering along to the words. Muttering along to Faithless. Muttering about skin and saving himself.

And he's finally still as Charley comes running towards us with a big butterfly net. She swoops it over the fallen C'rizz – trapping my mp3 with him! – and we're all standing still. Nobody really knowing what to say. The Doctor climbs to his feet and comes over to me, thanking me for saving his life. And I'm just standing there, laughing. Then I remember the two policemen and I stop laughing but, as I turn towards the cash machines, I see them drunkenly climbing to their feet. So I start laughing again. The Doctor and Charley see them and they're turning to me and before I can say anything, they've said goodbye and are running down a platform, carrying the comatose C'rizz.

I'm standing there. I'm looking up at the screen and I'm seeing myself alone in the station. My story apparently over. And I start to run. I run after them, screaming at them to stop and to tell me where

they're going and to take me with them and I'm crying. For the first time in years, I'm crying. And at the end of platform eight, I watch as they run into a blue box. And I run, so fast, run to the box but the door is closing and I put my head against it, and I feel it vibrating like it's alive and, from inside, I can hear...

Laughter.

They're laughing. All three of them. The Doctor, Charley and

C'rizz. And I'm so confused and I don't understand and then the box is gone in a rage of wind and noise. They've gone. I'm alone.

I'm at my parents' house and the funeral is over. After I'd been interviewed by the police, I was allowed to get the train home. Without my mp3, I sat on the train, idly wondering how many days off HR will give me for getting into a punch-up with two aliens and their femme fatale.

I'm sitting on the doorstep and I'm listening to all my family and friends as they remember the good times they had with Granddad. I'm sipping a whisky and I'm sitting in silence. It's not an uncomfortable one, though. After a while, my dad comes out to join me. He gives me an envelope.

'It's from your granddad,' he tells me before returning inside.

I open it. Inside is a photo. Black and white. The old days. It shows my granddad and three people I don't know. On the back, is some writing.

Luke,

If you're reading this, then I'm gone. I always wanted to write something like that! Please don't expect this to be telling you where my secret stash of gold is. Because there isn't one. Hopefully, something happened to you today. Something strange and magical.

Many years ago, just after your dad was born, I had to visit London for work. And I got involved with a man

called the Doctor. That's him in the middle of the photo. Before you turn it around to check, yes, he probably looks different from the one you've met. He does that, you see. He's hundreds, maybe thousands of years old and he changes his face and his friends and he travels through time and space and he's pretty damn amazing. The other two with him are his friends, Will and Emily. Anyway, a couple of years ago, we met up again and I helped him out with some problems he was having with these giant ants from Jupiter. Before he left, he asked me if there was anything he could do to thank me and I said that, yes,

there was. I told him about you. The thing is, Luke, I've watched you grow into a fine young man over the last few years. A man I'm proud to call my grandson. But you're sad. I can see that. You're lonely and you think too much. You're bored with life and you shouldn't be. So, I asked the Doctor to do me a favour. I asked him to let you experience what I'd experienced. I asked him to give you an adventure. So, hopefully, that's what he's done. If he hasn't then just accept this note as the last scrawling of a senile old man who thought he was a secret agent. Remember, Luke, there is so much more out there. *Carpe diem.*

Well, I'd better go now. I don't think I've long left.

Look after your mum and dad. And just be happy.

Yours,

Granddad

PS: Don't expect any kisses at the bottom of this. I may

be old and dying but I'm not soft.

PPS: x

And so, yeah, that's what happened. It was all just a story. That's

why I ended up on this train instead of the one to London. Where is

it going again? Well, that's somewhere new for me. You want to

see the photo? Here. That man in the middle is the Doctor. Looks

nothing like the bloke from King's Cross but see that box behind

them? That's the blue box I saw the Doctor and Charley carry

C'rizz into.

You know, everyone at the funeral was telling me what a hero I'd

been – they'd all watched my adventure on the telly. Thing is, I'm

not a hero because it wasn't real. It was just a story. But, I dunno, isn't that just as important? Granddad didn't want me to feel like a hero. He just, oh, I don't know. He just wanted me to feel

something. And I did. I felt alive.

Looking at that photo. It's weird because it's just a snapshot,

yeah? One image of a bunch of people and a blue box taken years

ago. But it's more than that to me. I look at it and I see, in my head, everything Granddad told me. All his stories. His entire life. All

captured in one still image.

And it makes me think about the Doctor. Granddad said he was

travelling with people called Will and Emily when he first met him. He was with Charley and C'rizz in King's Cross. He changed Granddad's life. He's changed mine. Meet him once and he really changes your life. But it makes me wonder just how many lives he's

touched. And it makes me wonder what it must be like to be him. We must look so tiny. All these tiny lives just rushing by. We're like ghosts to him. Fleeting images. Passengers on a train. How the hell does he cope with that?

But that's his story not mine. So I guess you'll have to find him to find out. Trust me, though. Find the Doctor. He's worth it.

The Sorrows of Vienna

Steven Savile

An Adventure of the Eighth Doctor

The Doctor studied the world as it was reflected through the eyes of a dead carp. Even distorted as it was by the peculiar filter, the world remained a wondrous thing to behold. But then, wonders and splendours were everywhere in this era of man. The crudeness of the Middle and Dark Ages had succumbed to a sudden craving for beauty. It was one of the reasons he enjoyed these brief sojourns into the Age of Enlightenment.

'Oh, Vienna.' The Doctor sighed, losing himself in the heady smells of the fischmarkt. It never ceased to amaze him how the simplest of things served to remind him he was alive – and how

much he needed those reminders.

The dead fish spun lazily on its hook as he held it high.

The Doctor marvelled at the perfection of each facet of Viennese life repeated in its slick scales – and in each one the sky was having second thoughts. It was still bright but the storm clouds were gathering above the open stalls, fogging over the chips of ice and the slabs of cod and roe and perch and carp, slick-bodied eels, swordfish and rainbow trout laid out across them. It was a beautiful rendition of life, so close to the world as he saw it, all of these slightly different possibilities and existences reflected through the distorting eye of the dead fish and its blemished scales.

He patted his pocket, looking for coins, felt the familiar and reassuring shape of his sonic screwdriver and one of his more recent toys, a holographic video-scope of sorts, a spyglass capable of glimpsing the past and future. It was fun to tinker with but more often than not he only ever used it as a kaleidoscope. There was something therapeutic about the shifting patterns of light.

Life ran in cycles, he knew that better than anyone. One day someone was on top of the world, the next they were crushed beneath it as it rolled over them. Another day they were surrounded by friends, people who would go to the wall for them; the next they were blindfolded, alone, the wall at their back. No matter how long

he travelled, the Doctor was always left wrestling a peculiar melancholy when he walked the worlds alone. Life was simply better with friends. There was, he chuckled mirthlessly to himself,

no solace in solitude. Friendship fashioned itself as armour against isolation and the hurts of the world; riven of it, that same friendship reforged itself as a sword eager to deliver death by its thousand cuts.

'You are in a bleak mood, old man,' the Doctor chided himself.

As he turned around he felt something brush up against his leg and looked down, puzzled as a black poodle ran between them. The dog had a link of Bavarian sausage dangling between its teeth. A flush-faced fop with a sharp nose pushed through the press of curious shoppers, grunting and cursing as he heaved them aside. His face split into a snarl as he grabbed a woman by the shoulders and screeched in her face: *'Go back to hell and take your damned devil dog with you, witch!'* The young man spun away and chased after the black dog as it disappeared beneath one of the stalls.

'Now that is something you don't see every day,' the Doctor mused as he set the fish aside. The woman, a pretty young thing in lace and frills, saw him watching and smiled coyly, not at all flustered by the madness of the young courtier's sudden rant. For a moment she looked disturbingly familiar, a ghost of a memory painted on a stranger's peculiarly cherubic face. It took a twin heartbeat for the Doctor to recognise the familiarity and put a name to it: Charley Pollard. Only it wasn't her. The resemblance was fleeting at best. As the woman that wasn't Charley turned away the Doctor was left with a sense of loss twice as sharp.

'You would think after all this time I'd forget what she looked like, especially considering how much of Auerbach's ale I've downed for just that purpose.' The fishmonger's smile was hollow.

He looked over the Doctor's shoulder at the woman who wasn't

Charley obviously seeing someone else on her pretty face as he

gutted the carp. He topped and tailed the fish before wrapping it in greased paper. 'Instead I see her everywhere I go, like she is

haunting me. I'm not a great believer in this spiritualism nonsense, but, you know, it does make you thinly. Perhaps true love really

does last forever? Wouldn't that be something for the poets to write about?'

'Love in a city of ghosts,' the Doctor said. In some ways it was

harder simply because of that, coping with the guilt of the left

behind. It turned his friend into a metaphorical ghost; a ghost

wielding a sword where once he had worn it as armour. Turning

once more he looked at the woman. She met his scrutiny with a

curiosity of her own, her eyes drawn to his plush velvet topcoat and
239

the silver pin securing his ascot, moving down and then slowly back

up to his face and his wild black curls. Her smile was almost

flirtatious, knowing, promising. It didn't touch him, not in the way she wanted. There was something about her eyes – they were cold,

and like the fish's, iridescent, silvered like mirrors to reflect all of the life outside without so much as hinting at the woman within.

The Doctor inclined his head, offering a wry smile, and took the

neatly wrapped package of fish in exchange for a battered shilling,

thinking about the old adage of the eyes being windows to the soul.

As with most old wives' tales there was a grain of truth to it; it

wasn't that they acted as a gateway to the soul itself but rather

revealed the absence of one. They frosted over, becoming almost

mirror-like after the soul had moved on.

He followed her with his eyes for as long as he could before he lost her as she merged with the press of market-goers, her back utterly unremarkable amid the sea of shoulders and heads washing up between the stalls. And then, like a memory, she was gone.

The Doctor left the shelter of the market's gently steepled roof and almost tripped over the black dog as it bolted for one of the narrow cobbled side streets that squeezed between the whitewashed walls of the buildings ringing the fischmarkt. The link of sausage dragged on the floor as it ran, turning blacker and blacker with every bound. The Doctor turned away, chuckling at the absurdity of the scene, as the angry young man careened into him, a grim resolve marring his face. Muttering and mumbling, he sent the Doctor sprawling ingloriously across the cobbles.

There was no apology; he didn't so much as miss a step in his headlong chase as he took off on his heels, howling at the dog.

Shaking his head, the Doctor pushed himself gingerly to his feet and dusted his hands off on the tails of his topcoat. The fish had landed a good ten feet away, the fall tearing through the greased-paper wrapping. The carp wallowed on the filthy cobbles.

'Well I... that was just... *rude*,' the Doctor grumbled, straightening his ascot.

Devil dogs and silver-eyed women; something was very wrong in the Weimar.

The fish forgotten, he set off down the narrow alley after the man. The Doctor followed him on a merry dance through the masonic wonders of Vienna, from back alleys to wide boulevards, beneath dragging trees and smoking chimney pots, between iron railings and handsome carriages, behind the façade of respectability worn by the Hapsburg palaces, the Hofburg and the Staatsoper, all hemmed in by the walls of the Innere Stadt. They looked so permanent. Nothing in this life was as fragile as that illusion, the Doctor knew.

240

As he ran along the line of the wall, in the shadow of the immense Stephensdom church, all he had to do was close his eyes and their permanence faded, the walls crumbling as the Ringstrasse with its trams and horse-drawn carriages rose in its place, dwarfed by the baroque and Romanesque architecture of the old town. This was Vienna old and new, coexisting in his mind. He could almost reach out and touch the future.

Twice it looked as though the man had cornered the dog only for the black poodle to evade capture and scamper away, leading them further and further out of the Innere Stadt and into the seedier districts beyond the wall. The air was rank with so many smells it was difficult to distinguish one from another, rotten fruit, cabbage swill, the astringent ammoniacs of animals marking their place in this filth. There was noise, but compared with the Innere Stadt there were silences too. The noise was little more than the usual hustle and bustle of the poor eking out a life, living. It was the silences that were interesting. They marked the cramped and overcrowded streets

with their laundry hanging low and their fragrances of lust and need, bitterness, jealousy, and one more battered than the others, hope. The silences filled the spaces between the living. It was in the silences that the ordinary people of Vienna died slowly, without anybody noticing, one heartbeat at a time. And it was in those silences that the dog chose to hide, disappearing between wrought-iron gates beaten into the shape of the wings of death's angel.

The young man hesitated, a silhouette between the gates.

He cast a fretful look back over his shoulder and saw the Doctor nearing. He backed up between the gates.

'I cannot live this life, man! Look at me, trapped betwixt and between! I cannot dwell in a world of madness, straddled between the ghosts of loves lost and the bitter remorse of a life still to be lived! I see her everywhere, her and her damned dog! No, if this world is insane –' the man's voice spiralled irrationally, his words rising with the wind '– rather haunter than the haunted I would be.'

'Wait!'

But the man was already off, between the gates and away through row after row of cracked and weathered grave markers in the peasants' cemetery. It was one of the secret places of the city, hidden away from polite society. The stones were all blank, the dead unnamed in the afterlife, such was the eternal price of poverty.

The Doctor shivered as he entered the gates. The cemetery was overgrown, the vegetation run wild with no one to tend it. It was small; 15 rows of stones crowded into a tiny square between towering town houses, colder and grey, because the sun couldn't

reach down through the shadows to light the ground.

241

'Wait!' the Doctor called again but the man ran on, weaving drunkenly through the rows of broken stones after the black dog. On the ground before the first row of graves, covered in filth and saliva, lay the links of sausage. The Doctor picked them up. They were utterly unremarkable save for the canine bite marks.

Halfway through the stones the man turned and stared at the Doctor. 'Are you another one? Another ghost? Are you that damned hell hound metamorphosed into Mephistopheles himself? Why do you haunt me so? What have I done? Tell me, foul shade, I deserve that at least!'

'What? Oh, *these*?' the Doctor held up the half-devoured sausages. 'No, I just thought you might want them back. They're a bit chewed, sorry.'

'Lies! You think me some addle-minded simpleton? I know what I see... that is why they name you Prince of Lies. Surely you seek to drive me out of my mind and into the arms of death. Even this simple scholar knows your artifices, demon.'

'What are you talking about?'

'I name you devil! Leave me in peace!'

'I am no such thing,' the Doctor protested only for the man to turn and flee, stumbling through the graveyard. With no choice but to follow, the Doctor did just that. Lichen and other cold-air weeds and creepers had reclaimed part of the cemetery for nature, drawing it back into the earth. The man pushed through the thickening

undergrowth, casting fretful glances back over his shoulder as

though the devil himself was truly on his heels.

And then the man vanished.

It was as abrupt as that; one moment he was there, the next he

wasn't.

'Curiouser and curiouser,' the Doctor mused, moving more

carefully now, unsure as to what exactly had happened to the young

man. He pushed back the tears of a weeping willow and found an

utterly prosaic answer – a small stairway cut into the side of one of the buildings that led up to the roof. He climbed them two and three at a time.

The man was standing on the edge, looking down over the ribbon

of streets, his feet in the lead guttering.

'Ah, good man, you don't want to do that. It is such a messy

death. Besides, if you jump the dog gets the sausages.' It was a poor attempt at humour.

'What does it matter? It isn't as though the dead stay dead.'

The Doctor walked cautiously across the ridge of tiles, grateful

that it hadn't rained in days. Even so, the angle of decline for the wash-off and the overlapping lips of the slate tiles made it nothing

short of treacherous. 'You seem to know a lot about the dead of

Vienna, sir.'

'As well I ought, they will not leave me alone. They haunt my

every step.' The black poodle started barking on the street below,

clawing cobbles. The Doctor followed the direction of the dog's

stare.

‘Oh, sweet Charlotte,’ the man moaned, all trace of anger gone from his voice. He was left sounding utterly bereft. ‘Why won’t the dead stay dead?’

The Doctor watched the silver-eyed woman walk slowly along the street towards the black dog. The dog growled low in its throat but did not bolt. ‘My old eyes are not so good, I’m afraid. Tell me what you see down there.’

‘The love of my life,’ the man said flatly. ‘And that damnable dog.’

‘All, but that would be a good thing, no? Apart from the dog, obviously.’

‘Hardly, she succumbed to consumption a month ago and has haunted me every day since.’

‘Describe her to me,’ the Doctor said.

‘You can see her for yourself, sir. She walks this way, face raised to the sun. The love of my life, my great sadness.’

‘Humour me,’ the Doctor said, looking down at the familiar face of C’rizz walking through the fallen angel gates into the cemetery and doubting very much that this peculiar young man was enamoured with his former companion. An intimate pain welled up inside him at the sight of C’rizz’s peculiar mix of innocence and knowing, and though once more it was the most fleeting of recognitions – as the Doctor met the silvered eyes of the memory and the glamour fell – it hurt ‘Describe her to me, would you?’

‘What is there to say? She is beautiful as she always was, though now she wears her hair in twin braids where before it was curls. The ringlets were always more flattering. There is a harshness to the lines of the braids that brings out the swell of her cheekbones and the ruddy rouge of her lips. Always her face is ablush from the ill humours that torment her constitution, but it is her eyes now that are so different. Where once warmth and affection glittered she gazes upon me with the eyes of the dead.’

‘What is she wearing right now?’

‘Her floral gown with heavy skirts of ivory. It is the dress her family buried her in.’

‘Indeed. And she has haunted you ever since her death?’

‘She has,’ the young man admitted, unable to draw his gaze away from the woman he saw walking towards the hidden stair.

‘Quite fascinating but utterly preposterous, you understand?’

‘I understand the evidence of my eyes, sir.’

‘Indeed,’ the Doctor agreed, rummaging around in the deep pockets of his topcoat. ‘The evidence of the eyes is not to be sniffed at... ah, here we are!’ He held a small telescopic brass kaleidoscope in his hand. With a flick of the wrist he extended the viewfinder and raised it to his left eye. Adjusting the filter the light and patterns before his eye shifted as he moved them through the visible spectrum, splitting the light into its component parts until the reds, greens and blues separated and the thing that had worn C’rizz’s face and Charley’s before him, was stripped of all pretence and offered up bare. Through each twist of the filter the thing down there wore a different face, each one bleeding into the next, through sexes and

ages, but every single one was hauntingly familiar to the Doctor; the face of someone he had – in his own mind – somehow failed. He recognised the hurt of betrayal in the dead silver eyes that stared back through the lens of the kaleidoscope at him.

Somehow the creature in the cemetery was drawing confessions of guilt and failure from his mind and giving them faces once more – no, not only drawing the guilt and grief out, looking at it somehow intensified the raw emotion inside. The creature fed on regret, he understood it instinctively, but that didn't alter the fact that when grief pulled at his heart strings the Doctor felt it twice as hard as a mortal man.

He handed the kaleidoscope to the man beside him.

'Look at her now and tell me what you see.'

The man raised the kaleidoscope to his eye then dropped it abruptly. It clattered off the slates. 'What witchcraft is this?' he rasped as the brass tube rolled down the ladder of tiles towards the eaves. The Doctor crouched and scooped it up before it could fall over the edge and stuffed it back into his deep pockets. 'Get away from me, demon!'

'We're not back to that again, are we? Evidence of your eyes and all that? Tell me, what did you see?' The Doctor pressed.

'Your spyglass lies to the eye.'

'I thought we'd already established that you were being haunted? Was that not what you said a mere moment ago? So, sir, I ask you again, what did you see? Describe your so-called ghost to me.'

The man looked around him, down at the woman below, at the dog and the rows of cracked and broken gravestones. 'I do not

know what I saw. My mind tells me I saw something I could not possibly have seen, the monstrous face beneath that of my love. Was that the rot of purgatory that had eaten away at her flesh? If what your spyglass showed me is death, well, this life is not such a

bad place to be.'

He stepped away from the edge, emphasising his new-found will to live.

'That's the first thing you have said that I am not inclined to argue with.' Below them the dog began barking again, a harsh, rasping sound. Without thinking, the Doctor tossed the link of sausages off the roof and set the dog off into a frenzy of yapping. 'Is there another way down? I don't relish the prospect of tangling with... well, I am not quite sure what it is exactly but whatever it is I don't relish the prospect of tangling with it, if you catch my drift?'

'Across the rooftops,' the man said, pointing off towards the Innere Stadt. The Doctor followed the direction of his finger and saw – but for a few small jumps across sloping shingles – a near clear run across the rooftops all the way back to the wall.

'Well, what are we waiting for? Come on!' The Doctor thrust his hands into his pockets and stalked off, not quite running across the angled slates. The man hurried after him. Three times the Doctor looked back over his shoulder to be sure the thing with the silver eyes wasn't following them. Only twice did he see empty rooftops.

From above, Vienna was quite different from the city below –

especially in the more affluent quarters. Where down below it was dressed with a skirt of respectability, up above it was naked, dripping colour. There was the spattered filth of starlings and pigeons and other birds. The copper roofs green with corrosion and streaked white with dung. Soot and smoke smeared the polished facades black. Even the gargoyles wore the pitted weathering of pollution. The Doctor guided the man from roof to roof, working his way back to the wall with grim determination. They passed several narrow stairs cut into the sides of leaning houses.

'Who are you?' the man said finally, hands on knees as he struggled to catch his breath.

'The Doctor.'

The man looked up at the Doctor's grinning face and out-thrust hand. He didn't take it. Instead his brow creased quizzically. 'This city is full of quacks and charlatans pretending to be fakirs and mystics and healers of every creed and colour. The gullible swoon at their feet. What on earth qualifies you to be *the* Doctor rather than just a Doctor? That is like my claiming to be *the* poet; this place is brimming with the writers of durm and strang. To claim to be the poet is presumptuous.'

'Ah, but perhaps someone out there truly is *the* poet – it is possible, no?'

'No. All art is subjective, Doctor. What one eye savours another

reviles, what one ear melts for another despairs at. That is art, opening yourself up to ridicule and being pompous enough to

believe what you have to say is worth being listened to.'

'I think I like you, poet.'

'Poet if talent defines who we are, or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, if not.' The poet took the Doctor's hand and shook it briskly.

'The black dog! I should have guessed!'

'What?'

'Nothing, nothing, just thinking ahead. It's an occupational hazard.'

'Of being a doctor? I hardly think –'

'Oh, you do yourself a disservice, my good fellow, you think very well. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*! Tremendous work! Very close to genius.'

'And now you seek to flatter my intellect? You are a curious fellow, Doctor.'

'I've been called worse.'

'Well, those words were a long time ago. The muse has not been affectionate of late.'

'What with all the ghosts, I am sure you've had a lot on your mind... fear not, they will come again.'

'Perhaps if I make a deal with the devil.'

The Doctor chuckled. 'Who knows what the future holds? Just remember this, you only lose if you cease to strive. That is an important lesson, may it serve you well when the time comes. Tell

me, when was the first time you noticed Charlotte had returned?'

'It was late, I had been acquainting myself with the more

obliviate aspects of a drunken stupor at Auerbach's tavern. Where

does ever man go to drown his sorrows, Doctor? There can be no

better reason or need for drink. After she left me I sat in that tavern night after night drinking myself senseless, wallowing in self-pity, my hands wrapped around a tankard of the dark.'

'The dark?'

'Herr Auerbach's special ale. He brews it on the premises. He

calls it the Sorrows of Vienna in honour of that old play of mine,

the rest of us call it the dark because it is the drink we turn to when our lives seem hopeless.'

'I am sure he does,' the Doctor mused. 'What better name for a

drink, after all? Humanity seeks to drink itself into oblivion so why not name their preferred escape for what it is? The sorrow of an

entire city... I don't know about you, my friend, but with all this

running I have worked up quite a thirst. I think we should pay Herr

Auerbach a visit.'

'I don't see what can be gained from a drink right now,' the poet

said.

'Never underestimate the power of intoxication, poet. Many a

great writer has or will live his life in his cups and still create his masterpiece. Besides, no matter what I might have intimated, it isn't all about the drink – think, man, what evidence do we have?'

The answer was, of course, very little. The kaleidoscope had

stripped away the illusions long enough for the Doctor to know that

Charlotte was no ghost, and neither was she Charley or C'rizz or any other more distant regret. But there were a whole universe of possibilities as to what she might be, alien or otherworldly. Like every riddle there had to be a root, and in this instance the Doctor was relatively certain that the Sorrows of Vienna lay somewhere close to it. Basic instinct had served the poet well – in grief he had sought to drown his sorrows. He remembered the fishmonger's lament, and more specifically the throw-away comment that he had downed more than enough of Auerbach's ale to earn forgetfulness.

The Doctor smiled to himself.

One person reporting ghosts having drunk the dark was a coincidence, and while he himself had not partaken, two was an avenue worth investigating.

'Lead on, MacDuff,' the Doctor said with a flourish. The poet led him to the edge of the roofs and walked along the gutters until he found a narrow stair leading down. 'Are all the rooftops interconnected like this?'

'Many, but not all. It makes one fear the threat office. On this side of the wall every street is linked to the next, there are no natural breaks so if fire took hold it would run rampant in hours reducing all this to ashes and death.'

'Now there is a thought not worth contemplating,' the Doctor said, remembering the heat of Pudding Lane as he came down from the last step. The cobbles were slick with the wash of brooms. Cabbage leaves and carrots rotted up against the side of the house.

The street smelled of the ebb and flow of the flesh. ‘So, where is this house of libation?’

Goethe turned in a slow circle, gathering his bearings. He scratched at his rather protuberant nose thoughtfully then pointed off down the narrow street, towards the wall and the spectre of Stephensdom beyond it.

‘Excellent.’

Auerbach’s Tavern was a nondescript watering hole set into the wall itself, its façade utterly unremarkable next to the pawn shops and the confessionals that had sprouted up around the barrier. Indeed, there was nothing about the place to set it apart from any of

the many hovels they had passed save the small hand-painted sign of two tankards clashing and slopping foam that hung from a black iron spike above the heavy timbered door.

The Doctor hesitated for a moment on the threshold, his hand on the iron latch. ‘You realise, poet, that your life will change forever beyond this point.’

‘Perhaps it will give me something to write about,’ Goethe said.

The Doctor pushed open the door and walked inside. The twin reeks of sweat and despair hit him in tandem, stronger by far than the cloying smoke or the rancid smell of sour ale. He sniffed, inhaling deeply, trying to isolate the fragrance beneath the more obvious ones. It was sweet, rich, but he couldn’t place it. The taproom was dark, but not so dark that he could not see the

impossible as the door swung closed behind him.

Twenty heads turned at once; twenty faces of C'rizz stared at him, despair in their silver eyes as they raised their tankards to their parched lips. Beside him, Goethe fell to his knees, whimpering and sobbing, no doubt confronted by a wall of dead lovers. The Doctor laid a steadying hand on the poet's shoulder.

'Be strong, man, think of it as inspiration.'

'It is hell,' Goethe moaned.

One by one the C'rizzs looked away, disinterested, their attention returning to the tankards and the Sorrows of Vienna.

'Which of you is proprietor of this place?' the Doctor said, even as he rummaged through the depths of his pocket for the brass kaleidoscope. He knew, or at least thought he knew. None of the grievers answered but he hadn't expected them to. 'Let's put it another way, who do I need to talk to to get a drink around here?'

Still no one moved.

The Doctor's fingers closed around the cold brass shaft of the kaleidoscope. Looking around, he eased it out of his pocket. The inside of Auerbach's was as unremarkable as the outside.

Stormlights guttered, their oil turned so low they barely lit the far edge of the oak tables they stood on. Flames licked at the soot-blackened chimney as the open coals of the fire snapped and cackled.

'There is always a drink here for you, pilgrim,' the C'rizz behind the bar said, towelling out a goblet and pouring a tall measure for the Doctor. 'After all, without the kindness of strangers what are

we, you and I? Merely travellers, companions are what complete us.' He passed the goblet over the bar to the Doctor.

The accuracy with which the barkeep's words stung was no mere coincidence, the Doctor knew. The creature could taste his guilt and regret and was relishing it. His pain had become the creature's

sword. The Doctor embraced it, not as pain, but as comfort, choosing to remember what he had loved most about his lost companions, clothing himself in the hope they offered, armouring himself with all of the hours of their friendship.

The barkeep's answering smile was predatory.

'Devils! Each and every one of you! Devils! Damnation, I am in Hell!' Goethe grabbed at his coats and span him around, his face wild with fear. 'Doctor, save me from myself lest I lose my way to madness! This is the gateway to purgatory Alighieri himself wrote of, these drinkers the gatekeepers of that soulless place! There is no elaborate sign, no gentle descent. Save me!'

'Ahh, Johann, your usual?' The barkeep began to draw off another goblet of the dark, unflustered by the poet's raging. 'The Sorrows of Wien, if I recall? But, of course, that's why everyone comes to Auerbach's, to share in the suffering of others under the pretence of drinking themselves into oblivion. To wallow in the dark.'

'Back, fiend!' Goethe shrieked, propelling himself away from the bar.

‘Is that anyway to talk to an old friend, Johann? I’ve been good to you. We all have. The least you can do is drink with us.’

While the barkeep was distracted by Goethe’s desperation, the Doctor twisted the kaleidoscope’s lens, breaking it free of the brass cap. The poet’s pain grieved him sorely; he knew what it was like to lose someone. He knew better than others what it was to be faithless, alone, but for all that he clung to two core tenants: he still believed in hope, and more, in love. These two more than any others described the human condition. The mechanism sprung in his hands, part of the psychotropic device’s core falling free. The module cracked open as it hit the floor, drawing the eyes of the grievers.

Using the distraction, the Doctor pried the tri-part lens out of the kaleidoscope’s head and grabbed the nearest stormlight.

‘Now, let’s have a look at you, shall we?’ the Doctor said.

Holding the lens in front of the oil lamp, he increased the flame. Red, green and blue light sprayed out across the taproom, bathing each of the grievers in its sickly glow. The filter stripped away the griefs and regrets, or at least the illusion cast by them. One by one their C’rizz faces melted away, leaving sad men and women sat on wormwood-riddled stools clutching their sorrows in the tankards and goblets before them. He swept the light across them all one at a time, liberating them.

‘Out, demons! Out!’ the poet railed, pushing aside chairs and tables in his frenzy.

And then the lights fell upon the barkeep.

The Doctor could do nothing but stare as the face of C’rizz was

stripped from the thing as it poured out another goblet of the dark

and set it down on the bar.

The barkeep had no face with which to stare back at the Doctor –

it was utterly blank, smooth and featureless save for twin silver eyes that glittered with malice.

'What is that thing?' the poet gasped, horrified at the sight of the beast unveiled.

'A Bacchanite,' the Doctor said, naming the creature. 'Leave this

place, creature,' the Doctor commanded forcefully, stepping

forward. The triplicate light wavered in his hands causing the nose

and corner of a mouth to shimmer across the barkeep's vacant face.

'Why?' the Bacchanite rasped, cold laughter echoing within the

Doctor's mind. 'That would be a waste of all this beautiful pain.'

'It is their pain, parasite. They own it, not you. It is not yours to tap or distil. This is the last time I ask. Leave this place.'

'The devil is in my mind!' Goethe moaned, pressing the heels of

his hands into his temples as though trying to drive the Bacchanite's words out of his skull. 'What magic is this? Out! Out, damn you!'

'Oh, come closer, pilgrim. There is such suffering within you,

such an endless well... oh, my... nine centuries of grief, the weight of worlds past and future distilled to perfection. You are no wine,

pilgrim. You are a fine port of pain, a seasoned sherry of suffering, a gin of grief. You are a potent liquor for the wounded psyche.' The Bacchanite breathed in deeply, intoxicated by the mere nearness of

the Time Lord. 'Given time you could become my favourite victim,

pilgrim. I could free you from your suffering. Imagine a life free of that pain, those regrets, and such a long life.' The Bacchanite held out the goblet of the dark that it had just finished pouring. 'Take it.

It is for you, it always was. Drink deep, forget for a while. I feel your pain. I know how it is to be you. I know that wherever you go

there is such suffering to be found. Always so much suffering.'

The Doctor took the goblet from the creature's outstretched hand

and dashed it against the wall, the dark spilling down over the

whitewashed stone like blood through the triplicate light.

'I. earned every one of my regrets, creature. Every single one. I

would not lose them or bury them. They combine to make me the

man I am.'

'Though you are no man at all, pilgrim.'

'The wine!' the Doctor shouted to Goethe. 'Spill the wine!'

The poet staggered over to the roaring fire, grasped the wood axe,

and lurched towards the bar, swinging wildly. The axehead

thundered into the first cask of sorrow, spilling the dark across the
250

clay floor, soaking through the sawdust into the earth itself. Before the Bacchanite could stop him, the poet had driven the axe into the

second and third casks, splitting their seams. The creature roared its grief and anger, surging at Goethe, arms outstretched, fingers

hooked like talons to claw at his face.

The Doctor knelt beside the bar, trusting that the poet could keep

the Bacchanite occupied long enough for his plan to work – though

it barely warranted being called a plan, in truth. He pulled out the rest of the brass tube that had been the kaleidoscope and dug around inside it to get at the projection mechanism. The thing had little

finesse to it but it was never intended to – it was a toy. Even as his fingers picked at the settings he tried to recall the little he knew about Bacchanites. They were the source of the legends, of course,

the drunken revelries, the Bacchanalia, inspiration for the drunken gods of the Romans and the Greeks, though the Greeks at least understood the dual nature of the creatures, marking them as conduits, communicators between the living and the dead. It was more superstition than science, but it was frighteningly close to the truth. They gorged on the sorrows of the living. They sought out great loves because those knew the greatest pains.

'Of course,' the Doctor said to himself as the Bacchanite's claws raked across Goethe's face, the impact hurling him from his feet, over the bar and into the backs of two frightened grievers. The Doctor whistled sharply. The creature turned, the poet's grief forgotten in favour of the much richer flavour of the Time Lord's. The Doctor stood, resting the device on the bar, and tripped the mechanism.

For twin heartbeats nothing happened, then the small device thrummed, cracking open like a lotus blossom, brilliant blue light spilling from its core. And in the light, figures, the perfect rendition of lovers, Helen and Paris, Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan, Tristen and Isolde, Anthony and Cleopatra, Heloise and Abelard, even the star-crossed lovers of fiction, Montague and his Capulet, all of them and none of them, so perfect was the projection that none could hope to ever attain that kind of love, only strive for it.

'And with great love comes great pain,' the Doctor said, watching as the Bacchanite's attention shifted from him to the glittering image of the impossible lovers.

That was the lesson of humanity: though a man might have

precious little, little could be more precious to him. He had to know love to feel grief but without that he could never hope.

And though it looked for all the world as though a gateway had

been opened between here and there, there was no such magic.

These lovers were not Paris and Helen or any of the others, they

were replicants, toys to entertain. And in that their love was perfect, their grief absolute for it could never be real, complete.

The Bacchanite was a creature of simple pleasures and simple

pains; it could not hope to resist the lure of the projection, so strong was the grief wrapped around these great lovers.

‘Leave this place,’ the Doctor repeated, planting the seed. The

Bacchanite moved towards the light, reaching out with its clawed

fingers.

‘Such sorrow,’ the creature crooned longingly.

The Doctor nodded, watching as for barely a second the face of

the Bacchanite was infused with the Janus-like image of both of the

lovers in the light, one beneath the other. The creature reached out, trying to touch them only for its hand to pass through the hologram, causing it to waver and almost fail.

The Bacchanite shuddered with delight as it felt the imagined

pain. ‘There is nothing for me here, but there is so much suffering

there, so much, such a waste not to gather it in, such a sweet, sweet waste,’ the creature said to itself, and stepped into the light.

Its face stripped of features once more, the creature’s essence

suffused the light, its substantiality traded for more of the illusory pain as it gave itself completely to the imaginary lovers, feeding off their plight. ‘We will meet again, pilgrim. You have more suffering

within you than an army of ghosts.'

'I hope we do, Bacchanite. I hope we do. Because that would

mean l am still living, not merely alive.'

Only there was nothing there, no pain, no pleasure, nothing. The

Bacchanite tasted its own despair as it began to understand the truth, but before it could liberate itself the Doctor killed the projection.

And for a moment there was only silence, but that was broken by

the slow steady sound of the Sorrows of Vienna leaking out across

the taproom floor. Dazed and confused, the grievers looked from

one and other to the Doctor and the semi-conscious poet lying

sprawled out in the pain of an entire city. The Doctor pocketed the

small mechanism and found himself gazing sadly at the broken

brass tube of the kaleidoscope.

'I rather liked that little gadget. Still, no point crying over spilled Wien,' he chuckled at his own bad pun as he pocketed the lenses

and the tube anyway, knowing that one day, with time on his hands,

he would no doubt try to fix it.

He knelt beside the poet.

'I suspect you will have the mother of all hangovers in the

morning, poet, but at least you will have a morning. That is all any of us can hope for, isn't it?'

'What was that thing?' Goethe mumbled, trying to form his lips

around the words as they slurred out of his mouth.

'What do you think it was?'

'A demon, a devil, a thing of the underworld.'

‘That description is as good as any,’ the Doctor said, rising.

‘But... but that is impossible.’

‘Yes, it is, isn’t it?’ the Doctor’s eyes twinkled in the flickering light of the oil lamps and the open fire. ‘Use your imagination. I

must say it was quite wonderful to meet you, despite all this...’ He waved his hand about, encompassing the entire taproom. ‘Write

about it. I have a feeling your muse will be very happy with you if

you do, poet. Just remember, no matter what else you write, it is all about love. That perfect moment of happiness that cannot be

bettered, all the rest is sadness. Whatever deals the devils offer, life is about striving for that moment, not living it because once you

have lived it every moment thereafter is another small death along

the path to that final darkness. Remember that and you’ll be just

fine.’

‘Where did it come from? Where did it go? There is so much I

don’t understand, Doctor.’

‘Then make it up,’ the Doctor said. ‘That’s what most writers do,

after all. It was a pleasure, poet. I owe you in ways you cannot hope to imagine, but that is what it is all about, isn’t it? Hope? Let it be your shield, poet, your pen mightier than any sword.’

And with that he left the poet lying in the sorrows and old ghosts

of the city. Grief that would last seeped into the floorboards and

deeper into the earth itself. Grief that would come to draw tortured souls, poets, musicians and artists to this great place. And the

Doctor knew that the beginnings of a fabulous story of deals with

devils, black dogs and how that one perfect moment of happiness

could offer salvation, was already beginning to ferment in the poet’s mind.

Fan boys

Paul Magrs

An Adventure of David and Chris

My brother and me like to lie awake in our room and we'd talk all night if we could. We are careful to keep our voices low enough so Mam doesn't hear. So she doesn't come pounding down the landing, full of hell in her nightie, screaming at us to get some sleep. She goes on about how we have black rings around our eyes and how it's like we're in a dream all the time. And it's because we lie awake, chatting all night, every night.

What do we talk about? What do we spend all these hours going on about?

We talk about The Show. What else?

We try not to. We try not to go on about it too much. We try to be good for our mam because, like she says, she has enough to put up with and we have to be good boys and help her. We are old enough now to be a help to our mam. I am 12 and Chris is eight. Mam doesn't need to be shouting at us to get us to behave properly. She should be able to rely on us. We aren't little kids any more.

But still we're whispering through the night, every night. We don't mean to. But it goes like this:

'David...?' Chris will think of something. Something to do with The Show and he will want to say it to me straight away, before he forgets it. He will hiss across the gap between our beds, checking

that I am still awake. And then he will say something like: ‘What about old enemies?’ ‘What?’

‘Do you think they’ll be bringing back any old enemies when The Show comes back?’

‘I don’t know...’

‘Do you think? And which ones would be the best, do you think? Which ones would you choose?’

A pause. And what I should say back to him is: ‘Get to sleep. Shut up, Chris. We’ll talk about it tomorrow.’ Yet instead he has got me thinking about it now. My mind is racing. Who do I think will be coming back? The Show returns next week. There’s a whole

new season. Undoubtedly there will be old enemies coming back. There always are. Every year there is always some kind of return by someone or something from the pas.t It is one of the things we particularly enjoy about The Show. Guessing what will happen is part of the fun of it.

Across the other side of the room, Chris is giving a litany of monsters: ‘What about the Winn? The Zarbi, or... the Sontarans? The Krynoids...?’

‘The Zygons,’ I say.

The room isn’t completely dark. We don’t have any curtains up yet in the new house. Our wide, sparkling clean window looks out on the dark houses and pale car park of Sampson Place. The street

lights are smoky orange and the night is overcast. The clouds are heavy with snow and the moonlight coming through them is a milky purple. There's the glow in the sky from the industrial estate. The colours of night-time on this town are like the colours of Swizzels sherbet lollies.

So all this light in the room keeps us awake, along with the thought of monsters. Can we help staying up talking, then?

'Mechanoids!' Chris is still going on. 'Yeti! The Brain of Morbius!' One of the many Christmas presents he got last week was a new metal torch. It's got all these different settings so it flashes different colours if you want. At the moment he is playing a plain white beam across the walls of our room. Over the posters and the shelves of piled books, comics, annuals, *Star Wars* toys and space ships. The shadows shift about and I know he thinks he is doing special effects with his torch, making it look like the monsters and puppets and figures are coming to life.

Suddenly he asks, 'How come do you reckon our mam went mad at us tonight?'

'I don't know,' I say. 'Get to sleep.'

'We were just talking. We weren't acting up or anything. We were just talking like this.'

'I know.'

It was at the tea table. Mam was ladling out hot tomato soup into those funny-shaped bowls Brian's mam gave her. We were tearing open soft white rolls from Greggs and talking away about the new season and the new Doctor and suddenly Mam was yelling at us.

Will you stop going on and on about it? I'm sick to death of hearing about it. It isn't right, the way you two talk about it all the time.

You want to get a different interest. You want to get a proper

hobby, the pair of you. You want to get interested in real life, for a change!'

255

Then she whirled about and dumped the saucepan in the sink and

she fled the room. Chris and I stared at each other across the pine

bench thoughtfully. A bit guiltily. Then Mam's boyfriend, Brian,

came slouching in from the front room. He glared at us

suspiciously. Like he knew we were to blame for Mam's flaring up.

But as usual, he didn't say anything. He went upstairs after her to

their room to see that she was all right. Their bowls of soup sat on the bench going cold.

At last, Chris broke the silence. 'Do you think the new Doctor

will get his new outfit in the first episode? Or do you think he'll

wear the old Doctor's outfit for a while, before he gets the chance to change?'

I considered this. 'I think they might hold on a bit. It's always a

big moment, when a new Doctor changes into his new outfit. It's a,

like, ceremonial moment or something. So they might wait until the

second episode, I reckon.'

Chris deferred to me. 'You're right. Was that how it happened

before? When the Fourth Doctor started? After the Third Doctor

regenerated into him?' Chris is looking at me with those great big

eyes of his. Looking at me like I'm the font of all knowledge about

The Show. But I am four years older than him and so, of course, I know a great deal more about it than he does.

I've got him believing that I even remember 1974, and the last occasion on which the Doctor regenerated and changed his form; when the Third Doctor became the Fourth. Chris had only just been born then. To tell the truth, I can't quite remember it, but he seems to believe that I do. And it's important, somehow, during this changeover and the imminent arrival of a new Doctor, that I seem to know all about it. I have lived through one of these regenerations before.

'How long do you think the Fifth Doctor will be here for?' Chris asked. 'As long as the Fourth?' The Fourth Doctor has been in The Show as long as Chris has been alive and his eyes boggle at the thought of that amount of time over again. He can hardly imagine it.

'I don't know,' I shrugged, stirring black pepper into my bright orange soup. 'Nobody ever knows how long a Doctor will last. You just never know.'

Chris nodded solemnly at this. 'I still don't see why Mam gets upset like that.'

I nodded back at him. It's horrible when she gets like that. It's like she's in a panic for some reason, and like she can't contain all the feelings inside of her. She always dashes from the room, having yelled at us that we're doing things wrong. We like the wrong things. We do the wrong things. We are spoiled and destructive. We

don't value the sacrifices that have been made for us. We just don't understand. That's the trouble with us.

'She hates The Show,' he said. 'She thinks it's for little kids. She thinks you are too old for it.'

I blush at this. 'Rubbish.'

'She thinks we're both obsessed.'

This afternoon we went into Darlington on the bus. The four of us, as a family. It was a dull, wintry day with the sales on and the narrow streets of the market town heaving with pushy shoppers. We sat in Wimpys, having French fries, and Mam said she wished we hadn't bothered coming out There was nothing any of us wanted in the sales, was there? Anyway, it was only a few days after Christmas. Didn't we all have everything we needed?

Chris and I exchanged a glance. WHSmith's. We had to get to WHSmith's. We never passed up an opportunity of going there. Of racing up the wide staircase to the book department. Scurrying into the children's section. Poring over the stacks to see if they had any *Doctor Who* books we didn't have. It didn't matter that we had new, unread books at home. We had all these new presents to play with that we had hardly touched. Just the knowledge that there were *Doctor Who* books to be had in WHSmith's – newly published, new-smelling Target paperbacks – that was enough to get us out of the house, into the freezing wind and the discomfort of the bus and the sleety rain falling all afternoon.

We stood in the bus queue, waiting to go home, triumphant with two novels apiece in our paper bags. In a flash we had spent our Christmas voucher money from our aunties and our Big Nanna.

The books were on our bedside tables now, with bookmarks slipped inside. Chris had already whizzed to the end of *State of Decay* – the vampire one where the whole spaceship is a dagger in the giant vampire's heart. It was – like most novels based on The Show – a short 120 pages long. He had raced to the end well before lights out this evening.

'You'll get nightmares,' Mam had warned, when he told her what it was about. 'Brian? Have you heard what they're reading about?'

That was later this evening, as we all sat on the settee in a row, watching the quiz shows and sitcoms of Saturday night. It takes a long time for the new house to warm up and so we all sit under a duvet on the long settee when we watch telly. Chris and I were reading all the way through Paul Daniels and *Juliet Bravo* and *The Two Ronnies*.

'You want to read about nicer things,' Mam said, bringing in a tray of mugs of tea and chocolate bars and bags of crisps. 'Real life things.'

I looked up from *Planet of the Spiders* and smiled at her. I was just glad she was over her teatime outburst. We were back in her good books again. She settled back on the settee beside us and passed our snacks along and I returned to my novel.

'Mam just worries,' I tell Chris. I look over at the dark shape of him in his bed. 'You know what she's like. She can't see what we see in it all. It's just rubber monsters and daftness. That's how it seems to her.' Chris is still. Maybe he's fallen asleep.

Outside it's snowing now. The flakes are small at first, and then

big enough to cast shadows in our room as they drop past the window. Thick and fast, thick and fast. I feel like jumping out of bed and waking Chris up. Snow! We can get out on the sledge tomorrow! Real, proper, thick snow! Like the bit at the beginning of *The Seeds of Doom*, when they find the deadly seed pods of the Krynoids at the South Pole. Snow as thick and deep and as proper as that.

I stay awake long enough to see that it's lying, heavily and snugly, on the flat roofs of the black houses. It'll still be there in the morning. I go back to bed and fall immediately asleep, which is strange for me.

I wake up and it's still the night. And I think – hang on – burglars. There's all this noise from the kitchen below our bedroom. Not loud noise. Not, like, noisy noise. Just noise like someone moving about normally. Rattling the venetian blinds that hang over the back door. They make a shivery, bladelike noise. There's the clunking of the lock. Someone's going out or coming in. And it's still pale moonlight and the shifting snow outside.

I used to lie awake on the alert for burglars. During that time when it was just Mam and Chris and me at home. After Dad moved away. Before Brian moved in. I used to expect burglars at any time. Breaking windows. Clunking about downstairs. Coming up the stairs to get us. I used to imagine what I would do. Back then I thought I had super powers. I was just a little kid. I loved to read Marvel comics. I believed I could throw intangible force fields around people or objects, like the Invisible Girl could. I could hex people with satanic bolts of light, just like Doctor Strange. I could fly

and burst into vengeful flame like the Human Torch. All of that would have come in handy with burglars.

Now I've got to be brave. I can still hear the noises, now that I'm fully awake, which means they're really happening. I need to wake up Chris and creep out into the hallway. I have to keep my cool. I turn to look at Chris and he's gone.

His bedclothes are rolled back, revealing the pale sheets

dampened in patches with wee. He's gone. He's up and about somewhere.

I take a deep breath and get up, making as little noise as possible. My feet feel like lead, frozen on the rough carpet.

Out on the landing I find Mam and Brian listening at the top of the stairs. Mam looks alarmed to see me there.

'What's happening?' I whisper.

They are both in their night things, looking scared. Mam shushes me. She gives Brian a shove, and he starts to creep down the staircase.

I tell them: 'Chris isn't in his bed.'

Mam jerks her head. Then she seems to burst into action. She storms down the stairs, pushing past Brian.

'In the kitchen,' she's saying. 'He's sleepwalking again.'

She rushes over and flings open the door into the kitchen.

Sure enough, the back door is wide open. Snow that was piling up

against its glass panels has tumbled onto the doormat. A freezing wind is swirling about the room, scattering cards off the swags of tinsel on the walls. The blinds are clattering and Mam is standing there, staring out into the night.

There's no sign of him. Somehow he has managed to unlock the door and let himself out. And he's gone off down our street, into the estate, still in his pyjamas.

These aren't really streets. They aren't set out in straight and logical lines. Every street is a cul-de-sac and they form an intricate and complicated pattern. Our estate seen from above would look like intestines or jungle vines or something.

In the snow it's even more confusing. It's lying thick now, melting the difference between road and path; smoothing rooftops and plastering the dogrose hedges. Everything is being smothered.

It's just past four in the morning. I can't even remember being up this late and this thought is quite exciting, even as we put on our shoes and heavy overcoats and prepare to go out and look for him.

I'm in pyjamas and my parka and my heaviest shoes. I've fetched Chris's torch from beside his bed. I've set it to the strongest white beam. We're off on an adventure, it seems like. Mam wants to phone the police. 'He's just a little boy. He's still asleep. Look at it out there!'

But we don't phone the police yet. Mam says they're useless. They'd take hours to come out anyway. She doesn't trust them. Dad is a policeman, that's why. We are better off ourselves, hunting the streets for him. He can't have got far. It's only been a few minutes.

In the dark garden she's locking up the house, stowing away the

keys in the pocket of her long, brown coat. And I'm shivering already. More excitement than cold. The fences and the gate are crusted with ice that's formed overnight, since the temperature dropped right below freezing. Chris most have had to really wrench at the back gate to get it open. But there it is, open to the street. And there are his footprints, heading off down the path. Right onto the road. The footprints are being buried and worn away by the new falling snow. They're almost invisible already. We have to hurry.

And I am thinking, of course: 'What would the Doctor do?' It's the obvious thought. The only way to be calm and self-possessed and actually do the proper thing in an adventure like this, when one of your companions' lives is at stake... the only correct thing is to do what the Doctor would do. And just now that means hurling ourselves into the whirling blizzard and following in Chris's footsteps.

It's at this point that we should, by rights, hear the blood-chilling and ear-splitting roar of some kind of snow beast.

But we don't. We plough on, playing the torch's beam ahead of us. Stepping gingerly on the road. The new snow has fallen on black ice that slicks the tarmac. It's treacherous. You could easily come a cropper. We are forced to slow. We call out his name into the night.

All the houses are dark around us. It's like we're alone on this whole estate. No one comes to help. And no one is even aware of us, creeping along like this, calling his name. Even Brian calls out 'Chris!' and I don't think I've ever heard him say his name before. Or mine. He doesn't call us anything, usually. Just like we don't

call him ‘Brian’, even though it’s his name. He wouldn’t like us to call him anything too familiar like that. And of course we can’t call him ‘Dad’. That would be wrong in loads of ways. So we don’t really call each other anything. Round our house, only Mam gets to call out names.

And she’s doing it now. There’s a shrill edge to her voice. She’s trying not to give in and cry.

This estate we live on stretches out for a mile or two all around us, into the night. It is surrounded on three sides by the big roads, which lead to the Centre and out of town, to the motorway going both north and south. That would be a bad way for him to walk in his sleep, towards the main roads. I can picture it now, with him shambling along in wet pyjamas, snow stuck in his hair. Like a zombie, or a kid possessed by a being from beyond time and space.

This end of the estate there’s all the fields of waste ground and long, scrubby grass. And then it’s the stark black branches of the woodland trees along the Burn. That’s the name of the narrow

stream running right through our town. It’s been left mostly wild, like a kind of nature trail. Us kids are always playing out there, but only in the daytime. Of course you’d never go down there after dark. It has become one gigantic mass of seething, crackling, living darkness. You get the feeling that, if you crept into that dark, it would close up around you and you’d never be let out again.

‘What if he’s gone down there?’ Mam asks Brian suddenly, seizing his arm. ‘What if he’s wandered off down the Burn?’

We're shuffling past the last few blocky houses before the path that takes you out of our estate. This path crosses the wasteland and the abandoned boating lake, before it reaches the next estate. That's the one where we used to live, when Dad still lived with us. We moved home because Brian didn't want to live in a house where another man had lived with us.

Right now Brian is mumbling to Mam. I'm picking out the words. Something about, how should he know where the kid has gone?

It's getting heavier, the snow. It's coming down in flurries and it lies like someone rolling out bolts of white, lacy material. Each flake seems to simply drop and take up its position with military precision in the great mass of snow. This is an invasion of snow. None of it is melting or shrinking away. It feels like the snow is here to stay and, at any other time, I'd be delighted. Come the morning, Chris and I would be running about, hardly able to wait to get out to play. Forcing down Ready Brek and grabbing our wellies from the cupboard under the stairs. Pulling on the woolly hats Big Nanna knitted us for Christmas. And then we'd be dashing out to be first on the fresh snow: to be the first to trample and plough it all up.

Brian is saying something else to Mani. His voice is low and broken up. He has got a stammer, which means that he hardly ever talks to anyone. Right now he is trying to get something out, something he's thought of. Maybe about where to go looking for Chris. I look back at them and his bearded face is all squinched up

as he wrestles with his words. Mam is losing patience with listening to him. She tries to pull away from his grasp. They are wasting

time. They need to be covering more ground and getting after the

kid. Suddenly Mam bursts out: ‘I’m going back home to phone the

police. It’s no use this, our running about. I’m gonna get their dad to come out and look. He’ll have to deal with this.’

Her words sound weird and hollow in the fast-falling snow,

which muffles every sound and robs them of echoes. Her words

make me feel even colder inside. I get this trickle of dread right

through me, because I don’t want her phoning Dad. Even if she

could get through to him in the middle of the night... and even if he
261

really could help us to find Chris in all the dark night and snow... I still don’t want him getting involved. I don’t want to see him and

have to talk to him. It’s been a couple of years since we last saw

him. And I don’t want him to see us in this mess. That’d be wrong.

As far as he is concerned, we are fine and everything is okay. It

would be horrible if he thought he was coming to the rescue. We are

doing just fine without him. And almost immediately I feel

ashamed, thinking this, because the important thing here is Chris

and our finding him and making sure he is safe.

I’m not the only one reacting badly to Mam’s idea. Brian is about

to blow his top. He’s doing that thing where his voice goes shrill

and even more stuttery. He thrusts his face right into Mam’s and

he’s grabbing both her arms. He’s saying something about how she

can’t phone that pig in the middle of the night. She can’t being him out here. She won’t be able to get him. And what does he care

anyway? There's no way he'd lift a finger to help.

Mam starts yelling back stuff about, 'What if Chris gets

hypothermia? He's just a little kid... He could be lying in the snow anywhere... And what if somebody grabs him? They could just take

him away anywhere. He's fast asleep. He doesn't know where he is.

You don't know who's roaming about in the middle of the night.:

As they struggle together under the pink sodium lamp at the edge

of our estate, their feet are kicking up snow all around them. The

soles of their shoes are slipping and smoothing and polishing the

ice. They'll fall if they don't look out. And I am frozen there. I can't do anything until they stop arguing. I turn to look into the dark

wasteground and the beginnings of the Burn and I wonder if I could

slip away and go looking for him myself. I could push that bright

new torch beam into the gloom and press on in the search alone. I

could be brave and find him by myself. How great would that be?

Mam is gasping, 'But he is the bairns' dad!' Her voice breaks

harshly because she is upset, and also because Brian is shaking her

backwards and forwards. He does this because he wants her to stop,

and to listen to him, and to see the sense of what he is saying. I have seen him do this before. Holding her by her upper arms and shaking

her. Now she's saying: 'If anything happens to the bairns, then he

needs to know...'

'Nnn-n-nothing'ss h-hhappened here,' Brian barks. 'W-what are

you talking abb-bout?' His higher-pitched, furious voice is familiar to me from those nights when they have blazing rows downstairs.

They have them very often, very late at night, down in the living

room. Shrieking rows. Dangerous rows. Smashing things up and laying into each other with fists and nails. Chris and me are meant to be asleep. But I sleep so badly anyway and, like I say, we're

often awake through the night discussing The Show. So we hear them. So we go out onto the landing. We sit on the swirly carpet at the top of the stairs. We can hear Brian when he squeals again and again, 'What are you talking abb-bout?' And Mam's voice is lower, sometimes pleading or taunting. And sometimes it's panicking.

That's when Chris and me creep down the stairs. We get to the middle stair. We dare ourselves to go to the bottom landing. To go down the hall. We steel ourselves to go to the front room. We have to make them stop it. But how? We're just kids. And they are so loud when they fight they can't hear as out here in the hall. We'd have to shout from the doorway to get them to notice us.

Once I went down and threw open that door. It was last year, a bit before Christmas. It was one of their very worst fights. I had my heart in my mouth, it felt like. It was pounding in the back of my throat. I was biting the inside of my cheek until I could taste blood. I grasped the metal door handle and threw open the door. And they were fighting each other. They had handfuls of each others' clothes in their fists. They were hissing and grimacing at each other, grappling like the kids at school did when they had scraps after hometime on the wasteground. The coffee table and cups were

overturned. They were trying to knock each other over and send the other one flying. I stood there shocked as they started taking swipes at each other's faces.

I screamed at them. I told him to leave my Mam alone. And that got their attention. They fell apart and started yelling both at once. Mam telling me to go back upstairs, it was all right. And him – him who never said anything at all to me – his face was blackened and twisted up. And he was bellowing at me: 'What you talkin' ahb-b-bout? What you t-talkin' ab-b-bbout?'

Out in the night he's yelling again as the snow gathers round us: 'And w-w-what they're gonna say if-f you phone the p-police? That you can't look after them. That the k-kids are out of control. T-they'll take them off you. They'll make them g-go away. T-that's what they'll do.'

Mam is moaning now. Shaking and sobbing in his grasp. She's given up on the idea of phoning our dad. I can see that now. So now we can't phone anyone for help.

We are trudging back home, scared and defeated. The argument between my mam and Brian still hangs in the air between them. Nothing more is said for a bit. We are frozen and soaking. We can't stay out much longer. It seems certain now that when we go back indoors we will have to phone somebody. The police. Official people. Someone who can sort this out. We walked out and we were

vanquished by the dark. We walked to the edge of the estate, where

the street lamps run out, and we came slap-bang up against the wasteground and the woodlands. If we went any further, then we would all be lost.

So we are coming back home. The new snow creaks underfoot. We can't even find the footprints we made when we set off on this expedition. We have hardly been any time at all. This is something Brian points out when he starts to speak again, in a quieter tone: 'It's only been 15 minutes or so. He can't have gone far.'

Mam snaps back: 'Fifteen minutes. What do you know? Anything could have happened in 15 minutes.'

I'm imagining an abduction. As we return to Sampson Place and see our house with its kitchen lights blazing in the darkness, I'm picturing what it might have been like if a saucer-shaped space craft had touched down on the wasteground in all the snow tonight. Indeed, the freak blizzard conditions might have been caused by that alien craft floating down through our atmosphere and settling on our estate. It is surrounded by a glowing nimbus of unearthly light. Yes, that sounds right. And it's getting all my favourite *Doctor Who* words in too – nimbus, unearthly. Voluminous. It is a voluminous space craft – quite possibly dimensionally transcendental inside. And it has passed through – yes! – a calamitous rip in the very fabric of time and space. So, here it is in Newton Aycliffe in the north-east of England. The space craft has landed, light as a snow flake. Fleeting as a brilliant idea.

Maybe my little brother knew that the space craft was there. He was drawn to it because he knew he had a rendezvous with danger

and adventure tonight, at four in the morning. The sheer promise of it drew him out of his warm bed and our home, and it brought him to the wasteland. He approached the strange, super-heated ship. A ramp was extending down from a brilliant portal. Three extremely bizarre beings were emerging to greet him...

This is exactly how a new story begins. A small boy sleepwalking. Impossible snow. The arduous trek to the wasteground. The waiting gold and silver ship, sizzling in the frost and ice. And three alien inhabitants being weird and friendly, gathering about him. One is a squid with bejewelled tentacles; another is a genius orang-utan; and the last one is composed of a fabulous crystalline substance. They explain to the boy that his help is needed. He is essential to their mission. There is something of vital importance that only he in the whole universe can do. And now they are begging for his help, these outlandish and awesome figures from beyond this humdrum dimension. How polite they are – and how alluring are their interstellar plans. Chris is quite calm 264 and pleased to be asked. Of course he will help them. Of course he will do the things that only he can do in order to help them accomplish their galactic mission.

All the while, of course, he is thinking of just how miffed and jealous I am going to be, when I get to hear about this. How he was the only one they picked, and how he was the only one – in all of time and all of space – who would be of any use. Of course he would go with them. So wide-eyed and trusting. And so jubilant –

that's the word! – as he is surrounded by new, otherworldly friends. They sweep him up the shining ramp into the dome of the saucer. Then its hatch closes on his heels with a massive clang. And off whirls the spaceship. Streaking into the pale night sky over Newton Aycliffe.

By the time we are back at our garden I'm thinking: but that must be a trick. He's been kidnapped by those creatures. They are probably alien mercenaries. That's the great switcheroo. The twist. Chris has been too keen to dash off into the cosmos. He was foolhardy. He won't be here when the Doctor comes to tell us – to tell me! – that he is hot on the heels of three galactic criminals, and he wants to know whether we have come across them?

When we get to our garden I take a deep breath. Just in case. It could so easily be true, couldn't it? Just imagine there was a police box standing there, waiting. We could just turn the corner and there it would be. Snow already settling on its pyramid roof and glowing lamp.

There are lights on next door. We've woken up the neighbours, it seems. The ginger twins' dad – a little man with a 'tache – is coming out to greet us. He's in his wife's housecoat, pretending it's his dressing gown. 'You must be out looking for your little lad. Christopher, isn't it?'

Mam kicks through the snow, hurrying over to him. 'Yes!' she shrieks. 'Have you seen him?'

'At ours,' the ginger twins' dad says, nodding.

His wife is in the doorway of their kitchen, framed in yellow

light. She's in her nightie and squinting at us through huge specs.

'He came knocking at ours, the poor love,' she shouts. She's so much taller than her husband. 'He got lost. Came knocking at the wrong door.'

'He's been sleepwalking,' Mam gabbles. 'I don't know how he got out.'

'Oh, aye,' says the ginger twins' dad and he leads as all into his kitchen, which smells of other people's cooking. Suddenly there's Chris standing there in front of us. He's got one of their blankets on, over his shoulders and his sopping pyjamas. He looks scared like he

thinks he's going to get told off. Mam grabs him and he starts crying the same time she does. At their kitchen bench the ginger twins are watching this scene unfold wordlessly. I'd expect the two of them to be pointing and laughing, but they're not. They stay quiet, drinking it all in.

'Where did you get to?' Mam keeps asking Chris. 'Where did you go?'

'Nowhere,' he says when, at last, she stops shaking him enough so he can get his words out 'I woke up outside. I didn't go anywhere.' He's holding the remote from our telly. He holds it out as if to show us.

'W-what's he d-d-doing with that?' Brian laughs. The way he laughs makes me feel sick. It's a too-jolly tone, as if he is always laughing and thinks Chris is a funny little scamp or a tyke and he's fond of him. Like he could ruffle Chris's hair. But he doesn't do

that. He says, ‘What’s he got the r-r-remote control for? What was he d-doing with that?’

Mam prises it out of Chris’s grasp and gives it to Brian. She hugs him and Chris stares over her shoulder at me.

It’s almost dawn and Mam’s ran a hot bath for Chris. The steam billows out on the cold landing, blue like mist in the early light. She doesn’t want him catching his death of cold. She strips his bed of the piddly sheets and makes it up new.

I pretend to sleep. I’m tired enough. The digital clock says it’s nearly six. I feel fluttery and weird inside, like it’s Christmas morning again. I’m supposed to be back asleep, but I’m watching the snow dropping down past the curtainless windows. It’s steady and hard, filling up the world outside, and I can’t shut my eyes.

At last I hear whispering and Chris, in new pyjamas, is talking with Mam. Time to go back to bed. I hear his bed shift and creak as he climbs between fresh sheets. She heaps the continental quilt on top of him and blows him a kiss. And me. And she’s gone.

Silence. And the morning light is washing into the room, a shifting blur of the palest blue. I lie on my back, staring at the purple silhouettes of the toys and annuals and stuff on the shelves.

I’ve still got Chris’s torch. I reach for it and switch it on. I have a go at shining different colours up the walls, doing special effects like he does.

‘You’ll wear the batteries out,’ he says. He’s nowhere near asleep.

I look at him. I turn off his torch and put it back on the bedside

cabinet. ‘Why did you take the remote control outside? What was that about?’

266

He shrugs. Then it’s like a huge wave of tiredness overcomes me.

I must drift off for a second, because suddenly Chris is talking again: ‘... when he sits on the end of the settee. Flicking from one channel to another. Flicking and clicking and turning it to Ceefax or whatever. And losing patience and turning the telly over again. Clicking and clicking. I hate it. It really gets on my nerves.’

‘Who, Brian?’

‘Who else?’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I hate that as well. Is that why you took it outside?’

He doesn’t answer. I think he’s gone off to sleep again. I turn to look at him and you can see by his face he’s back dreaming of Zarbi and Zygons and everything.

I’m trying too hard to sleep. I’ll give myself a headache if I try too hard. What does Mam say? Let every little bit of you relax, relax. And I ask her, isn’t lying awake thinking just as restful as falling asleep? And she laughs and says, no way! You have to fall fully asleep.

But I find it so hard, with all these thoughts whirling around.

Did I really think Chris was lost forever? Did I ever think he was gone for good?

I think I did. What if a real disaster had happened here tonight?

What would be happening right now, if we hadn't found him?

The kind of disaster like they have on the local news, when mams and dads and neighbours come on the telly and say what a tragedy it is. And what a great kid the kid who disappeared always was. And how you never really expect this kind of thing to happen on your own doorstep...

Did I ever really think something awful had happened to Chris?

No.

Because that's not how these adventures work.

Things – even the worst possible things – always work themselves out in the end, I think.

Wrongs are righted. Invasions are foiled. Time bombs defused. Time is run backwards. Everything is saved. Danger becomes something you can laugh at.

Evil is vanquished.

If only you can keep your head, and you never give in.

That's what I think, lying here awake in the snow.

About the Authors

BENJAMIN ADAMS's first encounter with the Doctor was in 1975, when at the tender age of nine he saw *The Claws of Axos*. He's never been the same since. His work appears in anthologies such as *Short Trips: The Centenarian*, *Horrors*! *365 Scary Stories* and *100 Vicious Little Vampire Stories*. He was co-editor (with John Pelan) of the Del Rey Books anthology *Children of Cthulhu*, a Bram Stoker Award finalist for Best Horror Anthology.

JOHN DAVIES's first story for Big Finish, *Dear John* in *Short Trips: The Centenarian*, was described by *Doctor Who Magazine* as

'captivatingly charming' and by **SFX** as 'the joy of *Doctor Who* in a nutshell', so, understandably, he felt no pressure whatsoever in

writing this story.

BRIAN DOOLEY has written sketches for *Monkey Dust*, *The Sketch Show* and *The Griff Rhys Jones Radio Show*, among others, and dramas for Radio 4. His BBC sitcom, *The Smoking Room*, won him the New Writer BAFTA in 2005. More impressively, he once

won the Crazy Caption Competition in *Doctor Who Magazine*.

Endless scribbled stories in school notebooks aside, this is his first attempt at writing a *Doctor Who* story and he is very nervous about following in the footsteps of all those talented men and women who

inspired him to write in the first place. Originally from Liverpool, Brian now lives in London.

NIGEL FAIRS has had 26 of his theatre plays produced, including *In Conversation with an Acid Bath Murderer*, based on the true story of John Haigh (Norwich), *My Mother was an Alien – is that why I'm gay?* , about a depressive sci-fi fan (London fringe), the musical *Oedipus the Queen* (Brighton) and post-nuclear children's play *The Severed Branch* (Horsham). His work for Big Finish

includes writing eight *Tomorrow People* audio dramas, four for their *Sapphire & Steel* range and a *Doctor Who* audio called *The Blue Tooth*. Other writing work includes book reviews and articles for a variety of magazines, and a short story about an unhinged

kids' entertainer, *Direst Cruelty*, in GMP's *Death Comes Easy* 268

collection. He has also worked as an actor, composer, clown and

psychodynamic counsellor.

IAN FARRINGTON has compiled four *Short Trips* collections and is the range editor of the series. He has also written for the *Short Trips* books *Life Science*, *A Day in the Life* and *Dalek Empire*, and for two anthologies in the *Professor Bernice Summerfield* range. He co-produced Big Finish's *UNIT* audio series, and was the assistant producer of the company's *Doctor Who* audio ranges from 2002

until 2006. He has also contributed to *Doctor Who Magazine* and is currently the sub editor of *All About Soap*.

ANDY FRANKHAM has written for two previous *Short Trips*

anthologies, as well as co-authoring a play for the short-lived *Space 1889* series produced by Noise Monster Productions. With his

successful ezine, *Pantechnicon*, he is pretty happy with how things are looking for the present. And, indeed, the future. Andy dedicates his story in this collection to Cerys and Jordan.

JAMES GOSS has edited the BBC's *Doctor Who* website, as well as writing for the torchwood.org.uk site. He's the co-adapter of the stage version of *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* ('wordy, overly complex,' *Variety*), which won the LA Weekly 2006 Theater Award for best adaptation.

SIMON GUERRIER has written six audio plays for Big Finish,

including *Doctor Who: The Settling* and *Sapphire and Steel: The School*. He is the producer of Big Finish's *Bernice Summerfield* range and has edited many anthologies, including the *Short Trips* collections *The History of Christmas*, *Time Signature* and *Dalek Empire*. His award-winning *Doctor Who* novel, *The Time Travellers*, was published by the BBC in 2005.

SCOTT HANDCOCK has written three audio plays for Big Finish,

contributing two instalments to the first season of *Dark Shadows* (*The Book of Temptation* and *The Christmas Presence*), whilst also pitting Benny Summerfield against *The Oracle of Delphi*. Since then, he has appeared behind the microphone in series such as

Bernice Summerfield and *I, Davros*, and is currently working in Cardiff as part of the *Doctor Who Confidential* production team.

COLIN HARVEY is a writer and part-time academic living in south London with his partner and two small children. Colin was the

winner of *SFX* magazine's inaugural Pulp Idol award in 2006 for his short story *The Stinker*. He has previously worked as a video-game story designer for Sony. Colin's journalism has appeared in

the *Guardian*, *Edge*, *Retrogamer*, *Develop* and *ScriptWriter*, while for two years he wrote the regular *Trivial Pursuit* column for the website *PopMatters*. His academic monograph *Grand Theft Auto: Motion-Emotion* was published in Italian in 2005 by Ludologica.

Colin is currently writing a science fantasy novel, provisionally

entitled *The Evolutionaries*.

LIZZIE HOPLEY is a RADA-trained actress and writer. Her radio plays include *The Elizabethan Beauty Law* (starring Annette

Badland as Elizabeth I) and *The Cenci Family* (which was shortlisted for a Sony Award and a First Play Award) – both for Radio 4

– and *Salome* for Radio 3 (starring Florence Hoath). Her sci-fi screenplay, *The Revenant Code*, was also shortlisted for a Sony Award by the British Film Council in 2004. For the theatre, Lizzie

has written *Pramface*, a horror-revenge tragedy about celebrity and chavs, which won the Plat de Jour in Edinburgh in 2005, has toured

the UK, and which provided the inspiration for her story in this

collection. Lizzie's first contribution to the *Short Trips* series was for *The Centenarian*. Her acting work includes voicing the

Mantasphid Queen in an animated series, *The Infinite Quest*, for BBC One's *Totally Doctor Who*, while her Big Finish appearances include roles in *Doctor Who: Night Thoughts*, *Cyberman* and *I, Davros*. In her Big Finish debut, she played Gemma Griffin, the Doctor's companion, in Joseph Lidster's *Terror Firma*. Notable TV

and film work includes *Pierrepoint* with Timothy Spoil (Granada Films) and *Randall & Hopkirk (Deceased): Whatever Possessed*

You? (BBC).

JOSEPH LIDSTER (editor) has written extensively for Big

Finish's series of *Doctor Who* audio dramas as well as contributing scripts for their *Sapphire & Steel*, *Professor Bernice Summerfield*, *UNIT* and *Tomorrow People* ranges. He's also written a number of short stories and a novella for the same company. In 2006, Joseph

wrote fictional content for the BBC's *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood* spin-off websites. He recently abridged the *Torchwood* novels for audio and

wrote the official blog for the Doctor's latest companion, Martha Jones. He is currently writing an episode for the second

series of BBC Television's *Torchwood*.

PAUL MAGRS was born in 1969 in the north-east of England. He

has published novels for children, teens, adults and *Doctor Who*

fans. His most recent novel is *Never the Bride*, published by Headline.

STUART MANNING is a designer and writer, and currently works

on the staff of *Doctor Who Magazine*. He has also produced many cover images for Big Finish projects, including for this anthology.

He is a producer and contributing author on Big Finish's *Dark*

Shadows audio dramas series, and his short fiction also appeared in *Short Trips: Solar System* in 2005.

GARY OWEN is a playwright. His work has been produced in the

UK by the Royal National Theatre, Paines Plough, Sgript Cymru,

the Sherman, the Theatre Royal Plymouth, the Watford Palace

Theatre and Theatre 503. He's won the Meyer Whitworth Award,

the Pearson Best Play Award, the George Devine Award and a

Fringe First from the Edinburgh Festival. Overseas his work has

been produced in New York, Philadelphia, Ottawa, Reykjavik,

Oslo, Stockholm, Dresden, Nuremberg, Athens, Tokyo, Sydney and

Melbourne. His plays are published by Methuen, and he lives in

Splott. Gary dedicates his story in this anthology to Gwyn Thomas.

STEL PAVLOU makes stuff up for a living. So far he's made up

two novels, *Decipher* and *Gene*; a movie, *The 51st State*; some short stories; and a collection of other noodlings. This is the third time he's made something up for *Doctor Who*. You'd think they'd know better by

now. Stel is currently adapting *Rendezvous With*

Rama for Morgan Freeman and David Fincher.

HELEN RAYNOR is a script editor on the new television

production of *Doctor Who*. She also contributed a two-part story for series three and the episode *Ghost Machine* for series one of *Torchwood*. She is currently writing scripts for *Doctor Who*'s fourth series and *Torchwood*'s second. She contributed to the BBC One daytime drama strand *Brief Encounters* and wrote the play *Running Away with the Hairdresser* for BBC Radio 4. Previously, Helen worked in theatre as a director.

EDDIE ROBSON is the author of the *Doctor Who* plays *Human Resources*, *Phobos*, *Memory Lane*, *I.D.* and *Urgent Calls*, and the *Bernice Summerfield* plays *The Empire State* and *Freedom of Information*. He has also written books about film noir and the Coen brothers; walkthrough guides to computer games; reviews, features

and news for *SFX*, *Starburst* and *Cult Times*; and scripts for the comics anthologies *FutureQuake*, *Alien Safeword* and *Just 1 Page*.

This is his seventh Short Trip. He lives in Lancaster.

GARY RUSSELL is a script editor for BBC Drama in Cardiff,

working on *Doctor Who* and *Torchwood*. He recently wrote *Doctor Who: The Inside Story* for BBC Books and has written a number of 271

fiction and non-fiction books over the past 12 years. Until recently, he was also an audio producer at Big Finish, and before that his jobs have included magazine editor, publicity officer and a spot of

acting.

STEVEN SAVILE has edited a number of critically acclaimed

anthologies and collections, including, most recently, 2007's *Short Trips: Destination Prague* for Big Finish Productions, *Redbrick Eden* and *Elemental* for Tor Books in the US, as well as *Smoke Ghost & Other Apparitions* and *Black Gondolier and Other Stories*, the collected horror stories of Fritz Leiber. Steven is also the author of the Von Carstein Vampire trilogy, *Inheritance*, *Dominion* and *Retribution*, set in Games Workshop's popular Warhammer world, and has re-imagined the blood-thirsty celtic barbarian Slaine from

2000 AD in a new trilogy of novels for Black Flame. Steven has written for *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park* as well as his own novels and short stories, including *Houdini's Last Illusion* (Telos) and *Angel Road* (Elastic Press). In his copious spare time, Steven...

erm... writes... He was a runner up in the British Fantasy Awards,

and a winner of a Writers of the Future Award in 2002.

JAMES SWALLOW is a novelist and scriptwriter, creator of the

Sundowners series of steampunk westerns and the only British writer to have worked on a *Star Trek* television series. His credits include the *Doctor Who* audio drama *Singularity*, the *2000 AD*

plays *Dreddline*, *Jihad* and *Grud is Dead*, and *Space 1889: The Steppes of Thoth*. His short fiction appears in the *Short Trips* collections *Dalek Empire* and *Destination Prague*, and the *Bernice Summerfield* anthologies *Something Changed* and *Collected Works*.

A mysterious ghost haunts a hotel in India. The terrifying alien C'rizz attacks commuters in King's Cross Station. Beneath a London council estate, a creature is waiting to be born. And, on a distant world, an old man trades stories with a mysterious time traveller.

Throughout his adventures in time and space, the Doctor meets so many people and each one is affected in some way. The waiter who keeps a special table for the Time Lord's granddaughter, Susan. The American student who befriends lost Lucie Miller. The teenage girl who discovers that she may be something more than human.

What is it like when that strange blue box appears in your world and you're given just the briefest snapshot of the Doctor's life?

What is like when everything changes?

Featuring stories by Helen Raynor, Brian Dooley, Paul Magrs, Stel Pavlou, Colin Harvey, Lizzie Hopley and many more!

ISBN 978-1-84435-267-8

UK: £14.99

Science Fiction

BIG FINISH

www.bigfinish.com

9"781844"352678"

Document Outline

- _FC
- _Index
- _ST21
- RC